

Spinoza's Critique of Religion and Its Heirs

MARX, BENJAMIN, ADORNO



IDIT DOBBS-WEINSTEIN

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Spinoza's heritage has been occluded by his incorporation into the single, Western, philosophical canon formed and enforced by theologico-political condemnation, and his heritage is further occluded by controversies whose secular garb shields their religious origins. By situating Spinoza's thought in a materialist Aristotelian tradition, this book sheds new light on those who inherit Spinoza's thought and its consequences materially and historically rather than metaphysically. By focusing on Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno, Idit Dobbs-Weinstein explores the manner in which Spinoza's radical critique of religion shapes materialist critiques of the philosophy of history. Dobbs-Weinstein argues that two radically opposed notions of temporality and history are at stake for these thinkers, an onto-theological future-oriented one, and a political one oriented to the past for the sake of the present or, more precisely, for the sake of actively resisting the persistent barbarism at the heart of culture.

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Vanderbilt University



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*In memory of the family I never had and of my mother,
Bella (Bilhah Shifrah) Weinstein
(1913–2002)*



(The author's mother on her father's knee. Poland, 1916.)

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Preface

There must be a human estate that demands no sacrifice.

– Adorno

Living is a leaving of traces.

– Benjamin

This book has its remote intellectual origins in a 1978 seminar on Critical Theory taught by Christian Lenhardt at York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, in which I first encountered the thought of Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas. Although Christian urged me to continue graduate work in Critical Theory, for several reasons, prominent among which was the “unification” of the medieval philosophical canon by its reduction to Christo-platonism, I decided to pursue graduate work in medieval philosophy, focusing on the almost entirely occluded influence of Jewish and Arabic philosophers on major Christian ones in the Latin west. Although it may have appeared that I abandoned my interest in political philosophy in general, Critical Theory in particular, my project remained thoroughly political both in theory and in practice, as I hope that this book amply demonstrates.

The personal origins of this book are simultaneously simple and complex. They are marked by an abysmal absence and a loss: the absence of grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles, the loss

of a young, illiterate Arab girl, named Vera, to whom I was deeply attached as a young child growing up in Jaffa. They perished in the Shoah. She perished in Beirut, having been summoned there by her older brother during family reunification following the Sinai War, and after her aged father's death. They left no visible traces either after the Shoah or after the Lebanese civil war. Nonetheless, their psychic traces are inscribed in this book, whose only acknowledged, universal imperative is "Never Again Auschwitz," when Auschwitz, and the conditions that rendered it possible, persist.

Although I was not aware of this consistency between my personal and intellectual commitments for many years, these dual origins provide the unifying thread of my writings in, and commitment to, the history of philosophy, political philosophy, and politics and the way in which they flout tradition, albeit in a different way than *Negative Dialectics* "flouts tradition," a difference that marks quite precisely a commitment to historical materialism, to dialectics understood concretely and historically, and to a rejection of false clarity as another name for myth.

In the light of the dual and long history that gave rise to this book it should come as no surprise that the list of individuals to whom I owe a debt of gratitude is too large to enumerate, as are the invaluable critical exchanges in conferences, colloquia, and other academic gatherings. Among the academic conferences of specific importance to the evolution of this book, I must single out two. First, I thank Yirmiyahu Yovel and Elhanan Yakira for inviting me to participate in several of the meetings of the colloquia "Spinoza by 2000" in Jerusalem (the last of which was held in December 2011). Second, I am especially grateful to Stefano Ludovici Giachetti both for convening the outstanding Annual International Critical Theory Conference in Rome and for inviting me in the past few years to present plenary papers. Several of these papers became drafts of the chapters in this book. Among the individuals to whom I owe a debt of gratitude is James Grady for his technical and editorial assistance. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript, from whose critical comments it benefited.

Finally, no words can adequately express my gratitude to three close friends and colleagues *sine quibus non* personally and intellectually. To Ellen Levy, whose critical ingenuity has opened for me many ways of seeing the relation between word and image, in conversations, visits to museums and galleries, and crisply brilliant writing, for her unfailing support over the years. To Gregg Horowitz in more ways than I can count, ranging from conversations in our offices, planned and unplanned, to cooking dinners together while sipping wine. In between, *inter alia*, are Gregg's graduate seminars, which I often attended and from which I greatly benefited, long telephone conversations moving effortlessly between the personal and the philosophical, and above all his generous ability to turn half-cooked thoughts into ones that are clear, critical, and insightful. To Jennifer Holt for teaching me how to read literature philosophically, and vice versa, during many late afternoons of reading together stretched into evenings of conversation sustained by good food and good wine. Most important, every chapter in this book has greatly benefited from Jennifer's careful, critical editorial comments from early drafts of conference papers to its final version; within the stubborn limits of my commitment to demystification, which commitment eschews false clarity, it is a much better written book owing to her extensive input.

A short version of [Chapter 2](#) was first published in *Between Hegel and Spinoza: A Volume of Critical Essays* (ed. Hasana Sharp and Jason E. Smith, 2012); a significantly shorter version of Chapter 6 was first published in *Epoché*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Spring 2012). I am grateful to the editors for permission to reprint them.

Introduction

Of this alone, you see, is god deprived,
To make undone whatever has been done
– Euripidian Fragments, 5¹

I. Whose History, Which Politics?

My aim in this book is quite literally to undo the past, both its pastness and its necessity. By undoing the past I do not intend to violate Aristotelian modal logic about the relation between necessity and possibility,² as distinct from its Modern inversion, nor to deny that the dead are really dead. On the contrary, it is on behalf of the dead, in the attempt to fight against their second obliteration or consignment to oblivion, that I seek to undo the necessity of the past, a necessity whose mythical spell not only casts its shadow over philosophy and its history but also, and more important, petrifies our gaze, undermining our capacity for experience and thereby our ability to discern concrete, material possibility as the only real possibility to which we can appeal.

¹ As cited in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1039b10.

² As will become evident in [Chapter 1](#), for Aristotle, there is a significant difference between logical possibility, on one hand, natural possibility, on the other. Only the latter is real and determines the freedom and constraint on human action.

The title question motivating this brief introduction, the question “whose history, which politics?” formulated as a single question, is a question of possibility as the possibility of human freedom, let alone flourishing.

Although history and its distortions haunt this book, and although it is steeped in history, it is not a book of history, not even the history of philosophy, as the book title may initially seem to indicate, especially since it is written by one trained in the history of philosophy. Indeed, it is intended as an intervention, but one strictly situated in the project of Critical Theory rather than in the reception history of Spinoza.³ The insistence on the concrete, material, that is historical, specificity of possibility is at the same time a unifying thread of the book and the form of intervention in Critical Theory; for, “to brush history against the grain,” to transgress against the philosophical canon, with Benjamin and against Hegel, is *simultaneously* to undo the necessity of the past and to possess a “weak messianic power”⁴ capable of rescuing the dead from oblivion and thereby also, perhaps, of discerning concrete revolutionary possibility now. Since undoing the necessity of the past is the undoing of teleology, and insofar as it is not oriented to the future, “messianic power” must be understood as orientation to the redemption of the dead. I cannot overemphasize, however, that this is a very remote possibility indeed, if it is still a possibility at all, as will become amply evident.

Reluctant as I am to deploy the language of timeliness, a language already caught up in a given notion of history that is challenged throughout the book, nonetheless, I am compelled to say that this book is timely in several ways, one of which is also deeply troubling as well as alarming. Let me briefly explain. First, the transgression that takes the form of brushing history against the grain in this sense is not a destruction of the given as much as it is

³ As will become evident in [Chapter 1](#), there are several good recent historical interventions of the latter kind. An exemplary one in English by a philosopher is Goetschel’s *Spinoza’s Modernity*. In this light it is important to emphasize the fact that my philosophical interlocutors in this book are strictly determined by its concerns with Marx and Critical Theory rather than addressing the broader literature on Spinoza’s philosophy that shares my concerns with Spinoza’s works.

⁴ Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings*, 4:254.

a challenge to the givenness of the given.⁵ An important dimension of the givenness of the given is the curious acquiescence of philosophers in a stock of commonplace knowledge shared by followers as well as critics of their philosophical forebear. For the purpose of the present introduction and in anticipation of the following chapters, two brief examples must suffice. (1) Spinoza was a metaphysician, a certainty that requires either dismissing or circumscribing not only Spinoza's political writings but also the major part of the *Ethics*.⁶ (2) In turning Hegel upside down, Marx materialized teleology rather than rejected it, privileging a future oriented praxis severed from theory. All these readings of Marx implicitly or explicitly assume that (1) the very early critique of religion can suffice to overcome religion, (2) the critique of religion is distinct from and superseded by the critique of ideology, and (3) the critique of political economy is distinct from and supersedes the critique of ideology. In short, not only are there three distinct phases to the development of Marx's thought but also there is a progression from the young to the old Marx, from the young left-Hegelian to the mature Marxist. Were these the only possible or decisive readings of Spinoza and Marx, then this book is a quixotic undertaking. And yet I claim that the book is timely, and sometimes in deeply troubling ways.

First, as the title anticipates, a central premise of the book, and in a manner attentive to Marx rather than Marxism, is that the critique of religion is the exemplary form of critique, be it of ideology or of political economy, and hence it is also the basis for a materialist political philosophy.⁷ In the light of the

⁵ This is one aspect in which the form of Critical Theory that I seek to outline here and whose importance I emphasize in this book, exemplified in the writings of Benjamin and Adorno, is significantly distinct from deconstruction.

⁶ All references to the Latin text will be to the Gebhart edition. Unless otherwise noted, English references to the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* and the *Ethica* will be to volume 1 of *The Collected Work of Spinoza*, translated by Edwin Curley. All other references will be to Samuel Shirley's translations.

⁷ Thus, "the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism." Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 53. Note that this claim is not at all philosophically revolutionary if, as Kant will have it, critique is an awakening from a dogmatic (metaphysical) slumber.

progressive usurpation of politics by religion in the past few years, let alone the philosophers' acquiescence to its return to political discourse, I hope that this book will serve as sobering reminder. If indeed, as I argue throughout the book, the critique of religion has no power to overthrow religion, and if, as I also argue, religion will remain a psychic human need so long as oppressive institutions prevail, then the better we understand the theologico-political complex, the better we shall be able to understand the necessity for the separation of powers for the very possibility of democracy and freedom, even if we are otherwise highly critical of Modernity or the "Enlightenment." It is not surprising, therefore, that exiled Jewish thinkers as distinct in their political commitments as were Adorno and Leo Strauss, both of whom were certainly critics of the Enlightenment, shared a commitment to its uncompromising insistence on the separation of powers. Second, and most troubling, is the recent rise, widespread virulence, and often violent expression of anti-Judaism throughout the Western, "enlightened" world, an anti-Judaism whose monstrous form not only makes evident the blindness constituent of religion and ideology but also, ironically, *should* have but has not made amply evident the difference(s) between anti-Judaism and antisemitism, thereby bringing into relief the specificity of the "Jewish Question," if only we, the philosophers and "liberals," did not "refuse to listen."⁸ This is a strange specificity, one that can be transformed and translated as ideologically needed but, hence, can bring to light that "the Jews" of the "Jewish Question," who represent the previous and current object of fear and hate (a species of fear)⁹ nowhere exist as such but are rather Europe's perennially hated tribe, the other within,¹⁰ whereas the

⁸ Allusion to Plato's *Republic* 1 and, as will become evident in [Chapter 1](#), Kant's rejection of vulgar experience.

⁹ As Spinoza argues in E 3&4, hate is a species of fear, one of the two primary theologico-political passions; the other is hope.

¹⁰ For an excellent extensive study of the variegated history of anti-Judaism, see Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*. This study alone makes evident the highly problematic ideological deployment of "le mot juif" in Alain Badiou's polemical "arguments" in *Circonstances* 3. The refrain of Badiou *et idem alii* on the

“semite” is the other from without, the “product” of European imperialism and colonialism. Seventy years after the liberation of Auschwitz, we witness mass demonstrations throughout Europe provoked and attended jointly by extremists from Left and Right political parties (including intellectuals) together with Moslems from former colonies, chanting “death to the Jews,” vandalizing Jewish businesses, and firebombing synagogues. What is exceptional about this monstrous mass is that, were it not for hatred for “the Jews,” they would turn against one another – Left against Right, Right against Moslems, Left against claims for religion by right-wing Christians and Moslems alike. Most remarkable in twenty-first-century Europe is that current-anti-Judaism is now not only respectable but also increasingly the yardstick for Marxist commitments.¹¹

As I argue elsewhere, the emergence of the monstrous “fraternity” between right-wing extremists and European Moslems is both ironic and deeply troubling precisely because both the identity and rhetoric of these groups are specifically racialized in opposition to one another, “*rightly* opposed because of the materially concrete historical *experience* of colonial violence, *wrongly* united into a monstrous, unified entity whose existence depends upon the erasure of history.”¹² Succinctly stated, this is a pure form of the return to mythical violence. Moreover, insofar as this erasure requires either the outright denial of the contradictory experience(s) constitutive of this unity or the violent suppression of the contradiction between triumph and suffering, victor and vanquished, it makes manifest both a conscious gap and a

academic Left is, “I am not an anti-semite but rather anti-zionist, anti-Israel, etc.” Badiou’s claim that there can be no radical Left antisemitism is spurious. I shall refrain from considering these polemics, which I find to be philosophically unhelpful.

¹¹ That the policies of the current Israeli government must be criticized, that the possible violations of human rights by the IDF must be investigated, there is no doubt. That it is manipulatively deployed in order to foment anti-Judaism there is also little doubt. Furthermore, that no distinction is made between Gaza Palestinians and Hamas is not only an insult to Palestinians but also a cynical exploitation of the suffering of Palestinians.

¹² Dobbs-Weinstein, “Possibility of Praxis in the Age of Sham Revolutions.”

gap in consciousness that undermine or even eliminate the very possibility of self-consciousness, a possibility that can come about only through a concrete contrary experience that will render this monstrosity impossible.

Paradoxically, precisely because, historically, that is concretely understood, the current monstrous form of mythical violence – the concrete manifestation of the barbarism at the heart of culture that is the focus of Freud’s, Marx’s, Benjamin’s, and especially Adorno’s work – is new, and precisely because it brings into sharp relief, *for the first time*, the radical difference between antisemitism and anti-Judaism, whose insidious nature was previously latent, I shall deploy the language of antisemitism in the body of the book until the afterword at the end of [Chapter 5](#). I shall do so for two reasons: first because I abhor anachronism, and the thinkers whose critical affinity I explore in the book never explicitly recognized such a difference, deploying only the term “antisemitism”; second, insofar as it is a new form of barbarism, it is the mythical expression of concrete socioeconomic conditions whose relation to the culture industry requires a new excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (DE), one which must begin with a consideration of the significant differences between antisemitism and anti-Judaism.¹³

II. What or How Is Critical Theory?

Until relatively recently on a philosophical rather than electronic time line, Adorno was an émigré not only from Nazi Germany but ironically also from philosophy, outside Germany most visibly but far from exclusively in the United States. No philosophy department offered courses on Adorno or “first-generation”

¹³ Just as Adorno’s *Philosophy of New Music* was a third excursus to DE in response to changed concrete conditions that the earlier analyses could not adequately address, so now the new form of mythic violence, a form far more extreme than that which Schoenberg’s and Stravinski’s works expressed, requires a fourth excursus. The afterword at the end of [Chapter 5](#) of this book will begin to sketch some elements of such an excursus in the light of current events.

Frankfurt School, nor could articles on Adorno be found in philosophical journals. This historical phenomenon is true in an uncanny and far from innocent way about other Jewish émigrés the focus of whose work was political philosophy, especially those to whom history mattered – even if and when their politics diverged significantly: for example, Adorno and Strauss and, to a lesser extent, Arendt. The latter is not at all surprising; rather, it is a reflection of the theologico- or ideologico-political determination of philosophy. Likewise, and for similar historical reasons specific to the American academy, Marx and Freud were equally absent from the philosophical curriculum.¹⁴ The contours of this determination are numerous and diverse and its details beyond the concern of this book. For the present inquiry, suffice it to point out that “classical” European political philosophy and history of philosophy were expelled from philosophy departments and were exiled in political science, French, and German departments.¹⁵

It should come as no surprise that this political destiny determined to a great extent the form that first-generation Critical Theory, especially the thought of Benjamin and Adorno, assumed in the United States, namely, a literary and aesthetic form divorced from history and politics. Moreover, since “pedantic” philosophical or epistemological considerations were not primary, Critical Theory was often conflated with post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-modernism, and other forms of rejection of Modernity and Enlightenment, whose aim was the overcoming of metaphysics and the subject. Lost in this

¹⁴ On the influence of McCarthyism on American philosophy, see McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*.

¹⁵ Classical European political philosophy was inseparable from history and always preceded by philology. In contrast, with the ascent and predominance of positivism in the American academy, knowledge of original languages was not required in many philosophy departments. And although courses on certain figures in the history of philosophy were offered, most often Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, they were read in a decidedly ahistorical way. With the exception of Catholic universities, medieval philosophy was almost entirely absent from the curriculum.

“democratic” translation was, *inter alia*, the significant distinction between the “metaphysical subject” and the “subject of knowledge,” and hence between ontology and phenomenology, on one hand, political philosophy and politics, on the other.¹⁶ When the subject of knowledge disappears into the metaphysical subject that is to be rejected, lost is also the dialectic between subject and object, and hence theory and praxis, as will become evident in the following chapters.

Ironically, the revival of interest in Adorno in the past few years and his increasing “respectability” in philosophical circles have not abetted the “assimilationist” models of Critical Theory, they simply changed them. On the Anglo-American side there are claims to the proximity between Dewey and Adorno or alternatively the compatibility between Rawls and Critical Theory. On the “Continental” side, everything is Critical Theory, and Adorno’s thought can and must be reconciled with some very unlikely bedfellows, for example, Levinas and Arendt. Despite the extensive comparative literature on Levinas or Arendt and Adorno, I do not consider either to be a critical theorist or to be engaged in a critical commitment that can be generatively compared to Adorno’s. On the contrary, all attempts to reconcile their differences are forms of domestication, which forms can be translated into the question, why such a fear of negative dialectics, or why prefer narrative description to concrete aporia? In the case of Levinas I shall forgo a consideration of the futility of the attempt to forge affinities between his and Adorno’s thought not only because I wish to avoid unnecessary polemics but also, and more important, because Levinas is not presented as a critical theorist and his disdain for politics is writ large. The case of Arendt as a critical theorist is different, and I must address it briefly although reluctantly precisely because it will shed light upon the nature of, and reason for my critical engagement throughout the book with Habermas but not Arendt. Briefly stated, my disagreements with

¹⁶ Of course, there are exceptions to the complete conflation of the metaphysical subject. Husserl is one such example, which is why he was of a “positive” philosophical interest to Adorno, e.g., *Against Epistemology*.

Habermas (and for that matter Honneth and other second and third generation critical theorists) are disagreements *intrinsic* to the nature of the practice(s) of Critical Theory, a disagreement about the nature of critique, of dialectics, and of historical materialism. My analyses seek to make evident the reasons for my insistence upon the current importance of Benjamin's and Adorno's thought or their critique of society as a critique of the barbarism at the heart of culture, in the face of the violent, virulent and extensive return of anti-Judaism seventy years after the liberation of Auschwitz.¹⁷ Moreover, second- and third-generation critical theorists, like Habermas, engage Adorno's thought critically and substantially. Arendt, in contrast, does not, though there have been valiant attempts to present Arendt as a critical theorist.¹⁸ First and foremost, with the exception of shamelessly vitriolic, unsubstantiated *ad hominem* attacks on Adorno in print and correspondence with Blücher and Jaspers, Arendt never addressed Adorno's work except, perhaps, indirectly in her clumsy and racist defense of Heidegger, especially on "authenticity." It is profoundly ironic that her defense of Heideggerian "authenticity" would take a highly racialized form. As she writes, Adorno is "only a half-Jew and one of the most disgusting people that I know."¹⁹ Her accusations that Adorno and Horkheimer held responsibility for Benjamin's death or claims that they attempted to suppress his work are merely empty and at best an expression

¹⁷ If this is a form of the return of the repressed, it is a hydra form of it, because the "regressive" forms of "psychic" repression of European anti-Judaism have now joined forces with purportedly "progressive" forms. As pointed out earlier, anti-Judaism is now a, if not the, requirement of radical Left membership. Benjamin's "Theses on the Concept of History" and Adorno's "The Meaning of Working through the Past," as well as "Education after Auschwitz," in Adorno, *Critical Models*, are uncannily current, especially in the face of accommodationist claims.

¹⁸ Most notable among these in book form is *Adorno and Arendt: Political and Philosophical Investigations*, edited by Lars Rensmann and Samir Ganesha.

¹⁹ Arendt to Jaspers, April 18, 1966. Arendt's deployment of National Socialist terms of racial classification in defense of Heidegger is, to say the least, deplorable. There is a profound historical irony to this date that I am compelled to mention. On this precise date Adorno delivered his radio address "Education after Auschwitz."

of envy. Although she may have been Benjamin's personal friend, Arendt was neither his philosophical friend nor his interlocutor, which is made amply evident by her outright denial that Benjamin was a Marxist, despite his friendship with Brecht or works such as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility." These examples of Arendt's thoroughgoing personal animus toward Adorno are but the tip of the iceberg, though all are devoid of any philosophical or genuinely critical content.

Still, it may be argued as Rensmann and Ganesha do, that, despite the spite, there are significant affinities worth exploring between Adorno's and Arendt's thought, even in the absence of direct engagement. I do not agree with this assessment nor with the arguments presented on its behalf in *Adorno & Arendt*, even though they are presented by friends, to paraphrase Aristotle.²⁰ Since a proper, critical engagement with these arguments is far beyond the scope of this introduction, I shall very briefly point out why I do not consider Arendt's work to be philosophically or historically sound and why for this reason I do not consider her to be a critical theorist of any generation.²¹ In my judgment, the most succinct statements about Arendt's magnum opus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, by a thinker who is far from hostile to the purpose of her work, are those of Shlomo Avineri in his review of the book upon the release of its Hebrew translation. As he states:

It is difficult to classify Arendt's volume on totalitarianism as a book on philosophy, history, political science or mass psychology. In fact, it is a treatise about the history of culture that is tremendous in its scope, and in this respect it is in the tradition of all-embracing works like Oswald

²⁰ As Aristotle points out in *Nicomachean Ethics* I 1098a 12–17, while both friendship and truth are dear, as philosophers, "it is sacred to honor truth above friendship."

²¹ That Arendt is not a dialectical thinker does not per se disqualify her from being a critical theorist. One of the central differences in my view between first and subsequent generations of critical theorists is the relation between critique and dialectics. But, as I pointed out previously, this is a debate internal to Critical Theory.

Spengler's "The Decline of the West" or Arnold Toynbee's "A Study of History."²²

No work that is so eclectic and very broad can be critical, since it attempts to reduce all significant differences to an identity determined by an extrinsic criterion – a reduction that seeks to contradict immanent, let alone historical, critique. Rather, the elimination of differences, especially historically and politically significant ones, for example, between Nazism and Communism, is decidedly uncritical and antidialectical. More important and far more problematic is Arendt's presentation of "the Jews," a deplorable ahistorical presentation that reproduces the most pernicious stereotypes and attributes to the Jews responsibility for being the object of hatred. Although by her own admission Arendt was no historian, not only did she not shy away from making bold, historical generalization but also, and more important, she bases many of her historical claims on the most spurious, pernicious anti-Jewish sources, including the works of Nazi historians. Again, Avineri's succinct and even-toned remarks are the least hostile of the justified academic criticism of *The Origins*:

One of the problems with Arendt's historical analysis is that she bases her views not just on balanced, well-respected research, but also on the writing of Nazi historians such as Walter Frank, *whom she cites often and without reservation*. Frank, who headed the Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany, was responsible under Nazi rule for "cleansing" the German universities not only of Jewish lecturers but also of books written by Jews. Citing Frank, who committed suicide after the fall of the Third Reich, as a historical source regarding the role of the Jews in German history is problematic, to say the least.²³

²² Avineri, "Where Hannah Arendt Went Wrong." It is important to note that Avineri is a native German speaker and familiar with the book in German, published long before its Hebrew translation. In other words, his judgment is based upon a careful reading of the book.

²³ *Ibid.*, my emphasis. I restrict my citation to Avineri's review quite simply because it refrains from direct attacks on Arendt and from polemics. For less measured responses that argue for Arendt's incompetence as a political commentator and historian and that explore the strange phenomenon of the "Arendt Cult" despite her questionable scholarship, see Laquer, "Arendt Cult," and Wasserstein, "Blame the Victim."

Arendt's overtly elitist and racist private comments about her fellow Jews in a letter to Karl Jaspers from Israel at the time of the Eichmann trial were even more deplorable – simultaneously arrogant and anticritical.

My first impression: On top, the judges, *the best of German Jewry*. Below them, the prosecuting attorneys, Gallicians but still Europeans. Everything is organized by a police force that gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew, and looks Arabic. . . . And outside the doors, *the oriental mob*, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half Asiatic country.²⁴

For these reasons I shall not engage Arendt's work in this book further, but shall engage Habermas's thought critically when necessary.

III. Whose Theory, Which Dialectics? Historical Materialist Critique of Historicism

Although, as stated at the beginning of this introduction, this is not a book of history, nonetheless it is a book obsessed with history, especially history as history of the victors and the philosophy of history, from Augustine through Kant, to its culmination in Hegel as its justification, albeit to different extents. That is why the book both begins and ends by putting history into question. Framed as a question intended to orient the reader, it can best be stated as, "why begin with Spinoza, especially the critique of religion, rather than Kant as the significant forebear of Critical Theory?"²⁵ As will become evident in the following chapters, what is at stake is freedom, a Jewish form of concrete, material, historical freedom, a political concern with praxis, in contradistinction to abstract metaphysical freedom whose origin is Christianity even once it is garbed in purportedly secular

²⁴ Avineri, "Where Hannah Arendt Went Wrong," my emphases.

²⁵ This question is pursued by Norris, *Spinoza and the Origin of Modern Critical Theory*, as an intervention in the reception history of Spinoza. However, Norris and I differ greatly on what we consider to be Critical Theory. In a different vein, Yovel's *Adventure of Immanence* can be regarded as another such intervention, but not one concerned with Critical Theory.

dress. Succinctly stated, Spinoza's critical striving to free politics from religion recognizes two fundamental facts: (1) religious dogma is the arche of all dogmata and (2) the freedom to philosophize requires concrete, political freedom. The difference between the two traditions, exemplified by what I consider to be an abysmal gulf between Spinoza and Kant, is the focus of [Chapter 1](#), whose concern is with the Theologico-Political Construction of the Philosophical Tradition.

I begin by first situating the strange destiny of Spinoza's place in the historical canon of philosophy as well as the recent resurgence of interest in his thought in relation to the theologico-political repression of a materialist Aristotelian tradition. Second, I outline the radical philosophical differences between the Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic Aristotelian tradition, whose concern is right practice (orthopraxy), and the decidedly antimaterialist, Christo-Platonic tradition, whose concern is correct belief (orthodoxy), and I argue that Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno are heirs to this other, materialist tradition, whose first Modern voice is Spinoza's. In this light, I examine the philosophical expression of this occlusion as an endemic blindspot or prejudice at the heart of philosophy exemplified by the concurrence of antimaterialism and overt antisemitism (read anti-Judaism) in Kant's and Hegel's political philosophy and philosophy of history. For both Kant and Hegel it is precisely the Jewish concern with right practice, Jewish Law, that excludes Jews from membership in the human community. Third, in order to disclose the abyss between the two traditions covered over by the single, unified "Judaeo-Christian tradition," I begin to examine an alternative dialectical, materialist history through an analysis of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* as a secular or Jewish *species of* negative theology that "flouts tradition." Against interpretations of Adorno's concern with the ban on images through the lens of the mystical tradition, exemplified by Habermas, through historical and philosophical analyses of the differences in the understanding of this ban between the two traditions, I seek to make evident the thoroughly political nature of the ban in Judaism as opposed to its onto-theological origin in Christianity. Whereas in Judaism the ban on images is bound

to the prohibition against preparation for the messianic age, in Christianity it is inextricably bound to it; whereas in Judaism it is decidedly anti-teleological, in Christianity it is strictly and thoroughly teleological; whereas in Judaism the concern is justice and the eradication of idolatry, that is, human sacrifice, in Christianity the concern is salvation.

Having situated the differences between the two traditions in the question of freedom, in [Chapter 2](#), “The Paradox of a Perfect Democracy: From Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise* to Marx,” I examine Spinoza’s profound, even if occluded, influence on Marx’s political philosophy. I first outline the contours of the relation between Marx and Spinoza in relation to history and politics. Following a brief reflection on the politics of the scholarship on both Marx and Spinoza, a politics which leads to the occlusion in plain sight (in the MEGA) of Marx’s *Spinoza Theologische-Politische Traktat von Karl Heinrich Marx. Berlin 1841*, I argue that Spinoza’s work is the source of Marx’s radical critique of Hegel and the left Hegelians. Second, I argue that the same methodological principle constitutes the continuity of Spinoza’s and Marx’s works as well as motivates their rigorous materialist dialectics, namely, “*omnis determinatio est negatio*.” In Part II of this chapter, I examine Spinoza’s analyses of the commonwealth, in general, the Hebrew Commonwealth, in particular, and argue that it is the model for Marx’s political philosophy precisely because it provides the blueprint for a freedom from human rule that is concurrent with a radical economic equality. In Part III I first outline the manner in which Marx’s reading of Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise* (TTP) informs his critical engagement with the “Jewish Question,” against the grain of the general misreading of this text. Second, I argue that Marx’s historical materialist critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* is the form that Spinoza’s critique of political institutions in both the *Tractatus theologico-Politicus* and *Tractatus Politicus* (TP) must assume in nineteenth-century Germany.

Having brought into sharp relief the nature and extent of Spinoza’s influence on Marx, having situated it concretely, materially, that is historically, in [Chapter 3](#), “Judgement Day as

Repudiation: History and Justice in Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno,” I first retrieve the historical matter of Marx’s historical materialism, namely, bourgeois institutions and the ideology, that is, forms of alienated consciousness reflecting as well as sustaining them, and I argue that Adorno is the most radical materialist heir to Marx’s epistemology and political philosophy. In this light, I argue that the transformation of Marxist idiom between early and later versions of *Dialectics of Enlightenment* is in fact a reflection of a commitment to a Marxian historical materialism and concrete history. Second, against the prevalent misreading of the “Jewish origin” of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s thought on history and politics, exemplified by Habermas, especially the reduction of Jewish thought to Kabbala and messianic hope, I return to the political nature of the Jewish ban on images and its relation to the ban on the future orientation of history and politics. Through analyses of Benjamin’s writings on history and politics, I trace the contours of the “uncanny” blend of Judaism and Marx in Benjamin’s thought in order to make amply evident Benjamin’s relentless emphasis on the violent nature of utopian politics. Third, I examine the profound influence of Benjamin on Adorno’s thinking on history and politics in relation to theory and praxis. In the light of the inseparability between the ban on images and the ban on messianic politics, and against claims by later critical theorists to Adorno’s resignationism, I argue that Adorno’s critical thinking is a thinking of possibility and that this is its revolutionary or utopian moment, but not a teleological one. Informed by Benjamin, Adorno’s thinking of possibility seeks to break the spell of necessity characteristic of Hegelian history and dialectics. Likewise, it seeks to disclose the falsehood of the separation between theory and praxis and hence the regressive danger of actionist politics.

Having closely outlined the close proximity and affinity of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s thought on history and politics independent of apparent disagreements between them, let alone the opposition between them often emphasized by camp followers, exemplary among whom is Habermas (and Arendt’s vitriol), in [Chapter 4](#), “Destitute Life and the Overcoming of Idolatry:

Dialectical Image, Archaic Fetish in Benjamin's and Adorno's Conversation," I focus on the thoroughly misunderstood and extremely fecund correspondence between Benjamin and Adorno on art and politics. I first orient the discussion through an analysis of Adorno's reading of Benjamin's 1935 draft of the *exposé* on Baudelaire and subsequent correspondence on the fate of art or life in the reified world and argue that the correspondence can only be understood in light of concrete, material history. Despite the fact that the nineteenth century and late capitalism form the landscape of the conversation, I argue that it can only be understood in terms of a shared commitment to demystification situated quite precisely in the politics of the 1930s, of mass mystification and idolatry. Against the attempts to "rescue" Benjamin from Adorno, attempts that are surprisingly ahistorical and apolitical, whose exemplary poles are Habermas and Scholem, I bring to light the dialectical fecundity of their conversation about the fate of art not only in late capitalism or the age of commodity fetishism but also as the site where the collusion between fetishism and barbarism is made visible. I further argue that precisely where art and other collectable and discardable products of human labor become the emblematic fetish, the exemplary mystified commodity, it is the site where the liberation from the spell might occur and, with it, perhaps, also the liberation of the human world from labor as reified. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of the proximity between Benjamin's discussion of Surrealism and Adorno's discussion of new music in exposing the ominous nature of the harmonious reconciled whole, a discussion resumed in the following chapter as the question of the possibility of experience.

In [Chapter 5](#), "Untimely Timeliness: Historical Reversals, the Possibility of Experience, and Critical Praxis," I return to the question of history as a critical question, that is to say as a concrete theologico-political question, recalling that Marx, following Spinoza, argued that the critique of religion is the arche of all critique. I begin with an historical apologia that reframes the radical differences between the two traditions in terms of the opposition between Aristotle's and Augustine's thought on

history and politics and argue that Marx is heir to an Aristotelian understanding of praxis especially in relation to happiness or flourishing, as are Benjamin and Adorno, following Marx. I frame the discussion of history and politics in terms of Benjamin's "Theologico-Political Fragment," whose allusion to Spinoza is generally ignored, against the general philosophical tendency to orient Benjamin's theologico-political analysis of politics as violence in terms of the "Critique of Violence" or its reading through a Pauline lens. I argue that the experience of history as violence and of the philosophy of history as its justification gains further urgency in Benjamin's reflections on the possibility of experience, the *sine qua non* of breaking the spell of historical necessity and thereby exploding its promise of redemption as a threat to the living. History as violent threat and late capitalist society as catastrophic annihilation of the subject also constitute the continuity and affinity between Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno.

A guiding premise of the final chapter and the unifying thread of the book is the insistence that the question of the philosophy of history is a question at once political and aesthetic. As the discussions of Surrealism and music – which begin in [Chapter 4](#) – make amply evident for both Benjamin and Adorno, the possibility of experience is the possibility to experience a threat, a possibility predicated upon remembering the past as violence. This is also and for the same reason the possibility for critical, that is, thoughtful praxis. The discussion of experience proceeds in four moments: (1) concrete experience as the capacity to experience a threat; (2) the debt to Surrealism: experience as shock; (3) experience as catastrophe: *Philosophy of New Music* as excursus to *Dialect of Enlightenment*; (4) the possibility of experience, praxis, and politics after Auschwitz.

I conclude the chapter with an afterword entitled "The Possibility of Political Philosophy Now," which I pose as the question/assertion of, why return to early critical theory, especially Adorno, now? The Afterword consists of four sketches. The first is a brief historical correction in response to the widespread confusion or conflation of theology and religion serving theorists and

politician alike to argue for the accommodation of religion in the public sphere. The second focuses on the irreducible tension between secular democracy and religion. The third and fourth sketches consider recent events and current politics. Of these, the first considers the Arab Spring through its multiform regression to a Nuclear Winter and a theologico-political catastrophe; the second considers the concurrence of the European relapse into tribalism and anarchy with the rapid spread of virulent anti-Judaism as the current form of the regression of Enlightenment into myth.

I

The Theologico-Political Construction of the Philosophical Tradition

Since our identity is mediated and constituted through the past, we reach ourselves through history. Thus history puts ourselves into question and becomes the most dangerous place. History of philosophy *may* have revolutionary consequences, as far as it destroys this or that *fable convenue*. History puts us to the test. Historians are not making “the leisurely stroll of the pampered owner in the garden of the past”; rather they are path finders. Today, Socrates would do history.¹

Preface: Whose Anxiety? Or the Return of the Repressed

The rapid proliferation and great diversity of philosophical writings on the theologico-political question in the past few years are unprecedented since the seventeenth century of which it is the mirror image.² But, whereas the former was a response to the wars of religion which followed the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire and the breakup of the universal church and sought to either limit, control, or even eliminate the role of religion in civil society and the nascent nation-state, the latter was a response

¹ Brague, “History of Philosophy as Freedom,” 50. First emphasis mine. The quotation is taken from the preface to Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*.

² E.g., Habermas, *An Awareness of What Is Missing*; Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*; Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, *Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*.

to the insistent return of religion to the public sphere and the demise of the modern nation-state. Both responses can be said to be motivated by a concern for freedom, albeit different forms of freedom – freedom from religion or freedom of or rather for religion. And, it is both remarkable and ironic that, in the face of the disintegration of the modern nation-state and the economic institutions sustaining it, religion becomes an urgent question for philosophers, especially liberal political philosophers and, more broadly, philosophers of the Left.

This is a poignant irony because religion has always remained such a question in another, occluded philosophical tradition, a materialist Aristotelian one, whose repression is predicated upon the unified version of the philosophical tradition, itself an effect of religion or, more precisely, Christianity. The first Modern voice of this materialist tradition is Spinoza's; his rarely acknowledged heirs are Marx, Freud, Benjamin, and Adorno. When not literally occluded, these thinkers have either been expelled or exiled themselves from the dominant philosophy contemporaneous to them, relegated to other forms of academic discipline. Leibniz severed his conversation with Spinoza upon publication of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and the "Spinoza Controversy" (*Spinosismusstreit*) governed the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophical and literary landscape; Marx was relegated to Social Science and subsequently exiled from that science as well with the ascendancy of quantitative Social Science, because of a reductive misreading of *one thesis*; Freud and psychoanalysis were expelled from philosophy even as Aristotle's *de Anima* and commentaries on it continued to be read and, often, by the same philosophers. Benjamin is still rarely read by philosophers and is often ignored by Critical Theorists, and Adorno still remains on the margins of philosophy. The powerful philosophical resistance to these thinkers marks the very high stakes: namely, the nature of philosophy. In the case of Adorno the stakes get even higher, especially since to the question of philosophy is added the question of Left politics. Ironically, if not surprisingly given the stakes, benign forgetfulness has also served as safeguard against the distortion demanded by inclusion.

The most striking example of this “neglect” is the invisibility of Spinoza’s profound influence on Marx’s and Freud’s critiques of religion. A less benign form is the erasure of the radical differences between Judaism and Islam as legal traditions concerned with orthopraxy and Christianity as a doctrinal tradition concerned with orthodoxy. This erasure is also central to all readings of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* as a negative theology.

Part I. The Enigma of Spinoza

The past few years have witnessed and continue to witness a strange literary phenomenon in the form of publications in English of a surprising number of books devoted to Spinoza, a philosopher whose enigmatic status in the history of philosophy is evident in the ebb and flow that characterize the afterlife of his works from the seventeenth century on. Many of these books are translations of French texts written in the past twenty years, one is a new biography, and others are influenced by new directions in philosophy, both Analytic and Continental, and reflect contemporary concerns to which Spinoza’s works seem to provide “new” insights. Together with the renewed generative impetus to scholarship occasioned by the “rediscovery” of Spinoza’s numerous works, new English translations have been published in the past few years, including two different translations of Spinoza’s *Collected Works*, and *three* of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.³

To my knowledge, no philosopher has been simultaneously embraced and rejected for as many reasons as has Spinoza. At the same time as Spinoza was read as a rationalist, he was also read as a mystic; the same elements that have led to his description as a “God intoxicated man” gave rise to the accusations of pantheism and, most frequently, heresy; and the same “heresies” for which he has been denounced by some philosophers and theologians are the ones celebrated by others. Who was this elusive philosopher, and why did he generate responses as passionate as

³ See introduction, note 6.

they were diverse? Was Spinoza a critical follower of Descartes, but a follower nonetheless, or a precursor of German Idealism? Was he a significant forebear of Idealism's critics (Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx) or a precursor of contemporary cognitive psychology and neuroscience (Churchland, Damasio⁴), on the one hand, feminist philosophy (Gatens and Lloyd⁵), on the other?

The diverse forms taken by the recent resurgence of interest in Spinoza's works are strikingly similar to their previous destiny, with one exception: the repeated condemnations have been replaced by a celebration of his secular heresy by philosophers of radically different ilk. Thus, for example, both Steven Smith,⁶ who reads Spinoza as the father of liberalism, and Antonio Negri,⁷ who reads him as a proto-Marxist, regard him as their forebear. And this is but a meager list of the contradictory ways in which Spinoza was and continues to be read, rejected, or dismissed. Stuart Hampshire's 1962 stunningly frank reflection upon this "peculiar phenomenon," a reflection which he repeated at least twice, is as apt today as it *should have been* since the seventeenth century: "I believe that everyone who has ever written about Spinoza, and who has tried to interpret his thought as a whole, either has been, or *ought to have been*, uneasily aware of some partiality in his interpretation, when he turns once again from his own words to the original."⁸ In a different but equally disclosive way, the most recent publication of a literary text described on the book jacket as "a philosophical romance of attraction and repulsion, greed and virtue, religion and heresy," *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*,⁹ exemplifies the problematic

⁴ Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*. Also Paul Churchland in occasional printed comments, as well as personal conversations several years ago.

⁵ Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*.

⁶ See his *Spinoza, Liberalism and the Question of Jewish Identity*, as well as *Spinoza's Book of Life*.

⁷ See his *Savage Anomaly* and *Subversive Spinoza*.

⁸ Hampshire, *Spinoza and Spinozism*, 175. Cf. "Introduction to the 1987 Edition" and "Spinoza and Spinozism," written between 2001 and 2004 and published posthumously. My emphasis.

⁹ Stewart, *The Courtier and the Heretic*.

force of Spinoza's thought, again both negative and positive, on the imagination of philosophers, scientists, writers, poets, etc. Ironically, the affective power of Spinoza's work simultaneously exemplifies Spinoza's understanding of the power of the affects and often repudiates his conclusions about reason's relative inefficacy over the primary affects, and the effective and affective role of desire in the generation of knowledge as well as prejudice. More important, in all instances of what I describe as celebrations of Spinoza's secular heresy, there is a sense of urgency and anticipation that Spinoza's ethics/politics shield unmined powerful resources whose uncovering or discovery will provide long-awaited responses to the current crises of the authority of reason and of political legitimation, especially in the face of the imminent threat of the barbarism at the heart of culture once again made visible by the radical turn toward religious fundamentalism and reactionary politics.

Since an important dimension of the Spinoza enigma that *ought* to give rise to a dis-ease with the partiality of our interpretations, but more often does not, is manifest as a desire to specify his philosophical and historical belonging, a desire whose failure is evident in the multiplicity of interpretations, it is clear that any attempt to pigeonhole him must justify its own "objectivity" through highly selective readings. Is he a rationalist? If so, surely in a manner strikingly different than his preeminent purported Continental cohorts, namely, Descartes and Leibniz. Is he one of the first Moderns? Again, if so, surely in a manner distinct from what is traditionally understood by philosophical Modernity. Claims to the former must overlook the lengthy elaboration of the psychology of the affects and the repeated insistence in the *Ethics*, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, and *Tractatus Politicus* about reason's lack of power over the affects; claims to the latter must overlook his rejection of analytic geometry in favor of a Euclidian one,¹⁰ and his rejection, in fact ridicule, of teleological

¹⁰ For the place of Euclidean geometry in Spinoza's thought, and especially what is to be understood by Euclidean geometry, see Dobbs-Weinstein, "Maimonidean Aspects in Spinoza's Thought."

causality. More important, these readings ignore the fact that Spinoza rejects teleological causality as a fiction, not because it cannot be reconciled with the mechanical causality of the new physics, which it cannot, but rather because, in a significant way, his physics is not governed by mechanical causality, which is atomistic, but is rather an elaboration of an aspectival dialectic of affection and action, whose origin is an Aristotle as distinct from the later Scholastic one as Arabic and Hebrew are from Latin. The latter claim that Spinoza's understanding of causality originates in his physics, a physics that is Aristotelian in one important respect, brings into relief what in my view is the most pervasive and insidious prejudice constitutive of all readings of Spinoza, especially of the *Ethics*, namely, the insistence not only that the *Ethics* is a metaphysics but that Spinoza's ethics and politics are *based upon* a metaphysics. And, surprisingly, this interpretation is common to almost all readers of Spinoza, past and present, Analytic as well as Continental, including some of the most attentive ones, for example, Alexander Matheron and Etienne Balibar.¹¹

Again, ironically, if not surprisingly, the fates of Spinoza's heirs mirror his in many respects. Schelling's and Hegel's violent reinsertions of teleology and free will into Spinozism reappear in the common teleological readings of Marx; mystical readings of Spinoza's third-order knowledge are repeated in Kabbalist readings of Benjamin; and the simultaneous attribution to Spinoza of rationalism and mysticism reemerges in the "Marxist" disdain for Adorno's "privileging" of thinking at the same time as he is viewed as a practitioner of negative theology (Habermas, Finlayson, and even Scholem). These readings are decidedly ahistorical.

What is especially surprising about such readings is not only that they fail to answer the obvious question of "why the *Ethics* is an ethics," and circumvent the fact that in the *Ethics*, Spinoza derides metaphysicians and lumps them together with

¹¹ Representative examples are Matheron's *Individu et Communauté* and Balibar's *Spinoza and Politics*.

theologians, but also that they ignore Spinoza's major "metaphysical" claim, namely, that no thing exists *meta ta physica*, that is, outside nature, a claim whose political implications set Spinoza as far apart from modern political theory as is possible. For, to the same extent that Spinoza insists that there is nothing outside nature, and there can be no dominion within a dominion, to that same extent he considers the civil state (*status civilis*) as coextensive with the natural state (*status naturalis*),¹² so that claims to their real distinction turn nature upside down. For Spinoza, nature is always already political and historical.

Irrespective of the great diversity in the appropriations of Spinoza's thought since their appearance, with very few exceptions, all share one common assumption: the major influences upon Spinoza's thought, negative as well as positive, are those of the Western philosophical canon. This is one of the major assumptions that this book seeks to challenge.

Just as Spinoza's heritage has been occluded by his violent incorporation into the single, Western philosophical canon, a canon whose formation was occasioned by theologico-political prohibition, so is his heritage occluded by similar controversies surrounding the subsequent reception of his works both by self-proclaimed advocates and by adversaries. This book seeks to uncover Spinoza's "other heirs," those who think the consequences of his thought materially and historically, rather than claiming to be his disciples and violently incorporating him into their metaphysical systems. I am concerned first with Spinoza's occluded influence on Marx, and then with its heritage in Benjamin and Adorno. By focusing on Marx, Benjamin, Adorno, and, to a lesser extent, Freud, the book explores the manner in which, and the extent to which, Spinoza's thought significantly influences their materialist critiques of the philosophy of history not only as a metaphysical fiction but, more important, as

¹² In [Chapter 2](#), I discuss this difference in detail. At present, I wish to underscore the difference between the *status naturalis*, or "natural state," and the *status naturae*, or "state of nature." As will become evident, this difference is indispensable for understanding Spinoza's politics but is lost in translation.

a fiction which, under the guise of culture, harbors and shields barbarism. I argue that at stake for these thinkers, albeit in different ways, are two radically opposed notions of temporality and history, an onto-theological future oriented one, and a political one oriented to the past for the sake of the present or, more precisely, for the sake of actively resisting the persistent barbarism at the heart of culture. The more culture insists on its progress beyond barbarism, the more it claims to have overcome the past, the more insidious and invidious are its forms of oppression.

It may seem unwarranted and certainly extravagant to claim that the scholarship on Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno ignores materialist history. Since there can be little doubt that significant scholarship is devoted to situating each of them historically, what is at stake, in my view, is what we mean by materialist history and the manner in which, and extent to which, the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history are, respectively, the history of the victors and its justification, both of which determine the manner of their transmission as necessary.

Understood in this light, and as already stated in the introduction, the primary aim of this book is, quite literally, to undo the past, both its pastness and necessity, to undo the “necessity” of what we take to be the history of philosophy both because it is false and because it is the lie or ideology that sustains and perpetuates oppressive institutions, be they “obviously” repressive or insidiously so. I argue that to understand Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno as historical materialists is to understand religion/ideology as material conditions of oppression, immanent critique as practice. Or, differently stated, to understand materialist history dialectically is to understand it a-teleologically, to expose all teleology as theology. More important, to brush history against the grain is also to read history against its dogmatic appropriations, to retrieve other readings, other traditions. Thus, I argue that to understand Marx’s radical critique of Hegel’s political philosophy is to challenge Hegel’s readings of Spinoza with an other reading of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. To understand Adorno’s critique of the

modern subject is to challenge the Cartesian and post-Cartesian ego, who is fully present to itself and who is master of his will, with a careful reading of the psychology of the affects and the force of the libido in Spinoza's *Ethics*. To understand Benjamin's critique of the philosophy of history is first to understand his "Theologico-Political Fragment." In all these cases, the critique of the philosophy of history and the politics entailed by it exposes it as disguised, repressive, and repressed theology. And, although the evidence for Adorno's debt to Spinoza is less direct, his influence on Marx's and Freud's identification of the barbarism at the heart of culture is ubiquitous and that on Benjamin's political philosophy and account of history extensive and profound. The latter's debt to Spinoza is often disputed by readings of Benjamin either as a "Kabbalist" or as a vulgar Marxist, as well as continuous attempts to rescue him from Adorno, exemplified by Habermas. Against these accounts, the book will demonstrate the affinity between Benjamin and Adorno on history and politics. Rereading Benjamin and Adorno in this light, I argue, against widespread opinion, for a dialectically fecund affinity between their works, a reading that, in the spirit of Benjamin's "Theses on the Concept of History," by refusing to acknowledge differences between minor and major works, between essays and books, on the one hand, epistolary exchanges, on the other, between aesthetics and politics, places their works in different constellations, bringing into relief other, belated possibilities. In so doing, the book also makes manifest the fecundity of a materialist, critical dialectical exchange.

Finally, as a constellation introducing the following section, it is worth recalling that among the historically forgotten dimensions of the occlusions discussed earlier is the origin of Benjamin's proposal to brush history against the grain. This interpretative "method" is a paraphrase of Christianity's claim to brush "Judaism" against the grain, to remove the external, material chaff of the Law so as to expose its spiritual kernel, the first moment of separating members and heart (Romans 10), body and mind.

I. A Clash of Traditions

The original and long enduring impetus to this book came from a growing suspicion that what came to be understood as the tradition of Aristotelian epistemic and moral psychology is an expression of the culmination during the Renaissance of the Western, Christo-Platonic appropriation of Aristotle's work, in particular the *de Anima*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the *Metaphysics*.¹³ The overwhelming success of this process, a success greatly aided by the ecclesiastical/political attempts to silence all aspects of the Latin Averroist so-called heresies, foremost among which was the denial of individual immortality, inevitably assured the occlusion or loss of another Aristotelian tradition, the Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic one. Notwithstanding the interesting, even if ironic, light that this occlusion sheds on the role played by theologico-political forces in the shaping of what comes to be understood as the history of the philosophical tradition, my philosophical concerns focus on an occluded, materialist tradition of the *de Anima* and *Nichomachean Ethics*, especially their inseparability. For it is this inseparable relation, a relation that establishes the political dwelling of the human soul, that accounts for the heretical status of this other tradition and leads to its repression.

In relation to Spinoza, two decisive links in the transmission of this other tradition to the late Middle Ages and Renaissance are Maimonides or Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Cordova, 1138–Cairo, 1204) and Gersonides or Rabbi Levi ben Gerson (Provence, 1288–1344), both of whose works have been accused of and/or banned for promoting heterodox opinions. Maimonides' influence on the High Middle Ages is indisputable, although its extent is a matter of debate.¹⁴ The extensive criticism of his biblical interpretations in the TTP leads most

¹³ All references to Aristotle's Greek works will be to the Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library editions. English references will be those of Hippocrates G. Apostle published by Peripatetic Press, Grinnell, Iowa.

¹⁴ See Dobbs-Weinstein, *Maimonides and St. Thomas on the Limits of Reason* and "Jewish Philosophy." In the following section, I discuss Maimonides' distorted appearance in Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

scholars to concede Spinoza's familiarity with his work but conclude that the influence is merely negative and limited to the TTP. Viewed in this light, Maimonides stands for Spinoza's rejection of and by the synagogue. In contrast, Gersonides remains unknown, with very few exceptions. This is especially remarkable given the importance and influence of his astronomical works as well as his writings on Euclidian geometry. What remain entirely occluded and unavailable, however, are his most significant, strictly philosophical works. As the supercommentator on Averroes's commentaries on Aristotle's works, Gersonides is a highly significant source or trace of the transmission of the Arabic, Aristotelian tradition to the Renaissance and seventeenth century. Although in many respects he is its last explicit voice, I believe, and have argued, that he exerted profound influence on Spinoza, who is its last explicit proponent.¹⁵

In light of my overarching claim about the occlusion of another tradition, I shall first briefly outline two of the most significant differences between the two Aristotelian traditions, especially in relation to the *de Anima* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and second sketch the philosophical and political consequences evident in and as the Modern philosophical canon.

1. Whereas in the Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic, Aristotelian tradition,¹⁶ memory is an extension of sensation and

¹⁵ For two distinct exemplary arguments, see Dobbs-Weinstein, "Gersonides' Radically Modern Understanding" and "Thinking Desire." As already indicated, the afterlife of Spinoza's works is polyvalent. Ironically, however, none of the philosophers who explicitly identified themselves as followers of Spinoza are attentive to his radical materialism, a materialism that is relentlessly antimetaphysical; on the contrary. In fact, his explicit early "disciples," e.g., Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin, violently reinscribe his thinking into a Christo-Platonic metaphysics, including elements that he vehemently rejected as the most insidious prejudices, even superstitions, namely, freedom of the will and teleology, whereas his contemporary materialist followers still read him as a metaphysician, albeit a materialist one. Conversely, as I shall argue, those readers of Spinoza most attentive to his vehement critique of metaphysics, e.g., Marx and Freud, do not identify themselves as "Spinozist," precisely because they are attentive to his thought. For Spinoza was no founder of religion, not even in a secular garb.

¹⁶ For reasons of economy, henceforth I shall refer to this other tradition as the materialist Aristotelian tradition, originating in Alexander of Aphrodisias and

imagination or a storehouse of common sensibles and images and thus does not preexist these, nor exist independently of them, in the Latin, Christian tradition, especially after Augustine, memory is a part of the self-subsistent soul.¹⁷ Thus, even St. Thomas Aquinas, the most radical of the medieval Aristotelians, views memory predominantly as a part of the self-subsistent intellectual soul, distinguishing between a sense-based memory, which belongs to the embodied soul, and one that belongs to the separated intellect.¹⁸ Consequently, in contrast to the materialist, Aristotelian tradition for which where there is no sensation, there is not intellection, that is, where human knowledge is fully embodied, in the Latin tradition for which, in addition to embodied memory, there is an additional power of memory independent of sensation and imagination, whose objects are immaterial, there can be human knowledge strictly independent of sensation. All too briefly and reductively, Descartes's *substance* dualism is but the conclusion of a progressive separation between body and soul.¹⁹

2. As with memory so with the will, the Latin Christian tradition posits the will as a part of the self-subsistent intellectual soul and understands the upright will as a distinctly intellectual, and therefore active faculty, or as an efficient cause of distinctly human action. Indeed, will as an affect or passion is a mark of the human depravity consequent

Themistius and spanning through Maimonides, Averroes, and Gersonides. Although Gersonides wrote in neither Arabic nor Judaeo-Arabic, these are his explicit interlocutors.

¹⁷ Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Quaestiones de Anima*, Q. 19, ad 16.

¹⁹ Note that, prior to Descartes, there is no explicit detailed argument in favor of substance dualism, although Marsilio Ficino's violent misappropriation of Plato's *Symposium* clearly anticipates Descartes. See Ficino, *Commentarium Marcilii Ficini Florentini in Convivium Platonis de Amore*. For a new translation, see *Commentary on Plato's "Symposium on Love"*. In particular, Speech 4, C.3, Speech 5, C.11, and Speech 6, C.15.

upon original sin.²⁰ Since original sin plays no role in the materialist Aristotelian tradition of the *de Anima*, since moral, or rather ethical, virtues and normative categories are seen as conventional rather than natural, that is, since good and evil are not ontological or onto-theological categories, the will as an *independently* active, intellectual faculty does not even enter into the considerations of the nature of human knowledge. Differently stated, whereas in the Latin tradition the will is the faculty of assent to or dissent from not only “the good” but also “the true,” in the materialist tradition, truth requires no assent, and good requires habituation in a concrete convention.²¹ The most important consequence of understanding the will as an independent active faculty, especially when it is combined with memory as a source of knowledge independent of sensation, is the progressive separation of nature and freedom so that freedom becomes essentially freedom from nature rather than being concurrent with it. Whereas for this other Aristotelian tradition the concern with freedom is thoroughly political, for the “unified” Modern tradition, especially from Kant on, the concern is strictly metaphysical. I am convinced that the Latin philosophers’ concern with individual or personal immortality, whose denial was one of the two primary causes of the Averroist controversy, must be understood in this context. Likewise I am convinced that this understanding underlies Modern political philosophy.

The ironic mark of the success of the occlusion of the materialist Aristotelian tradition is that even today most historians of philosophy who are interested in this other tradition read it

²⁰ It is worth noting that this distinction will later be translated in the Modern canon into the relation between teleological and mechanical causality, with efficient causality being subsumed under teleological causality.

²¹ Although judgment (as distinct from truth) requires assent, it is not the will that assents.

through a modern lens, as will become evident in my reading of Spinoza and his heirs. In light of my claim that this tradition has been almost entirely occluded, and the contemporary “intuition” that Spinoza’s thought harbors, untapped powerful resources for thinking today, before proceeding, and rather than relying upon a contemporary intuition, albeit one shared by diverse philosophers, I shall first outline some pressing reasons for retrieving another Aristotelian tradition and enumerate those aspects of the Latin, Christian tradition, absent from the materialist one but necessary for understanding the emergence of the Modern ethos, an ethos whose purportedly secular garb, even when it appears to be diverse, shields its unifying ecclesiastico-political origins. It cannot be overemphasized, however, that my concern is with retrieving an other tradition so as to simultaneously exhibit the violent, political nature of the constitution of a unified canonical tradition and its optionality, or lack of necessity, rather than with the recovery of the *true* Aristotle, Spinoza, or Marx. Indeed, for the philosopher who eschews the separation of theory and practice, the philosopher who does not assume her apolitical, neutral isolation, Aristotle, Spinoza, or Marx always offer new insights.²²

Broadly stated, and viewed in the concrete, highly polemical, and politically dangerous historical context in which Spinoza responded to Cartesian dualism, on one hand, ecclesiastico-political repressions, on the other, it is my claim that uncovering an other, a-dualist (more precisely, Averroian) Aristotelian tradition with which Spinoza was at least as familiar as, in fact more familiar than, he was with the Latin tradition makes visible not only the extent and radical scope of the differences between other modern philosophers and Spinoza but also the non-, indeed

²² It is worth noting that by emphasizing the freshness of an Aristotle, I also intend to resist the common distinction between the Young and Old X. Even when a philosopher’s later writings are self-critical, the reasons for the criticism are occasioned by concrete political experiences at least as much as by purportedly strictly theoretical more mature concerns.

antiphilosophical, and decidedly violent origin of the occlusion of the one tradition by the other.²³

For the purpose of this book, suffice it to enumerate the elements of this occlusion and its fundamental prejudices,²⁴ and to underline the fact that they are both the *concrete, historical* condition for the possibility of a unified, Modern philosophical canon and the specters that haunt and thus constitute the secular double named by post-Modernity. These occlusions as well as specters are in fact the constituent concepts uniquely belonging to Modern philosophy and the Enlightenment, and those that render Aristotle's and Spinoza's thought either entirely opaque or scandalous, or both. The aforementioned occlusions in fact determine the foundation of Modern concepts, whose foundational nature renders them inaccessible to historical critique.²⁵ Owing to these occlusions, and against the mythical transparency of the Modern philosophical idiom, its narcissistic enchantment with its own clarity, my discussion will often appear to be awkward, clumsy, uncanny, and, at times, perhaps even unintelligible. Differently stated, to translate into a respectable, familiar language an idiom and thought that have become uncanny owing to occlusion and repression would amount to complicity

²³ When needed, the notes and bibliography will provide references to articles and books focused on the relation between Spinoza and his Arab and Jewish predecessors in this other tradition.

²⁴ I deliberately use the term *prejudice, praejudicia*, in the sense that it is deployed by Spinoza, i.e., in relation to its affective dimension, rather than the far less politically laden term *bias* deployed by Gadamer.

²⁵ The claim that occlusions determine the foundation of Modern concepts is meant quite literally, insofar as occlusions exclude, first by denunciations and condemnations, and second by proscribed, i.e., legal prohibitions or repressions, other possible determinations, let alone modes of inquiry. In order to escape the "vicissitudes" of history, i.e., to argue for a historical necessity, so as to found certain knowledge, real possibility has to be reduced to logical or, at the very least, rational possibility, irrespective of experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Modern ethos is an ethos of construction and that analytic geometry provides its ideal model. For an illuminating discussion of the differences between the pre-Modern and Modern ethoi of philosophical inquiry, see Lachterman, *Ethics of Geometry*, to which I am deeply indebted.

with, and sanction of violence and its perpetuation. But, to paraphrase Aristotle, “the mark of the educated person is to demand of her subject matter as much clarity as the subject will admit,” or to quote Spinoza, “*praeclara tum difficilia quam rara sunt*,”²⁶ or as Adorno will repeatedly emphasize, “false clarity is another name for myth.” In addition to differences among the philosophers I address occasioned by concrete, material, and/or historical concerns that will emerge in the following chapters,²⁷ I must mention one significant distinction between two *ethoi*, the premodern and modern, that occasions an important shift in mood and intention. Most succinctly stated, whereas the materialism of Aristotle, Maimonides, and Gersonides is a-dualist, that of Spinoza and his heirs is anti-dualist; where the criticisms of other philosophical opinions leveled by the former are a result of shared difficulties, precisely because of a shared ethos of inquiry, Spinoza’s criticisms arise from the radical difference between his ethos and that of his late Scholastic predecessors and modern contemporaries. Consequently, whereas the former share their interlocutors’ idiom and understanding of the political basis of normative categories,²⁸ Spinoza’s idiom involves a devaluation

²⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* I, and Spinoza, *Ethics* 5. It is worthy of note that Spinoza’s *Ethics* ends where Aristotle’s NE begins.

²⁷ As will become evident, these types of differences may be found in the different texts of the same philosopher and are determined by the different subject matter, audience, etc. In the absence of a universal method, far from indicating philosophical inconsistencies, to do otherwise would be inconsistent with the mode of inquiry into different aporiae, or different aspects of the same aporia.

²⁸ I insist that this is the case even where common opinion reads otherwise, as for instance in the case of Aristotle’s critique of Plato. For, as already indicated, the fate of Plato’s books is no different than that of Aristotle’s. There is indeed another Plato in the Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic tradition. In fact, the proto-Christian Plato, the Plato who is the saintly other of Aristotle, is the result of the intervention of Ficino in the anti-Aristotelian aftermath of the Averroist controversies. Hence, despite attempts by Kristeller and others to minimize or even dismiss the claims to Ficino’s anti-Aristotelian and especially anti-Averroist sentiment on the basis of his early Scholastic training and use of “Aristotelian” categories, Ficino’s stated desire to Platonize the Florentine academy, his lifelong attempt to harmonize Platonism and Christianity, and his radical transformation of so-called Aristotelian categories and/or terms such as “natural inclination” and “soul,” as well as his insistence that “man

and revaluation of values from the beginning, by deploying all “conventional” terms against the grain.²⁹

Of all the aspects of modern philosophy, the one that is literally unintelligible from the perspective of the pre-Modern materialist tradition, but also the one that is foundational to Modern philosophy, is the unified, isolated, or independent subject. For, in the absence of dualism, there can be no determined, unified subject independent of sensible “objects”; rather there is a fluid, aspectival relation between affection and action, the sense, sensation, and sensed, whereby the more an individual is affected, the more she comes to be in act and in turn can affect others in the same respect.³⁰ What can be said to be unified is experience (*empereia*), which comes about by repeated sensations, where sensation is the result of the aspectival relation between the sensing and the sensed.³¹ *Empereia* is indeed material, but it is certainly not immediate, let alone transparent to a sensing subject.³² This is one of the most significant dimensions of the materialist tradition that not only becomes literally unintelligible with the emergence of the modern subject but also that is suppressed and repressed. It is in virtue of this repression that John Locke, *inter alii*, can claim to follow Aristotle and is counted as an Aristotelian. In the light of this brief summary of the occlusion

is the soul itself,” and that “the soul is immortal” (74), can neither be underestimated nor understood independently of the Averroist controversies. It is worth recalling that, less than a century before Ficino, one of the most influential Renaissance humanists, Petrarch, composed vitriolic diatribes against the Averroists. See, e.g., his letter to Luigi Marsilii entitled “A Request to Take Up the Fight against Averroes.” *Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, 143.

²⁹ In this respect, among others, Nietzsche is indeed Spinoza’s heir, as he himself tells Franz Overbeck in a letter from Sils Maria dated July 30, 1881.

³⁰ In fact, the pre-Modern subject is the “*hupokeimenon*,” i.e., that material substratum that undergoes affection, and to that extent can know and act.

³¹ It is especially unfortunate that, in order to render inflected terms into respectable English, the translation always supplies the terms subject and object which are absent from the Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin, e.g., “sensing subject and sensed object” replace the sensing and the sensed. In so doing, the translation is, at best, misleading. It becomes by far more misleading when the terms *objectum* and *ideatum* are both translated by the English term “object,” as it is by Curley.

³² See *Metaphysics* I 980b30–981a3. Cf. *Posterior Analytics* 100a4–12.

of an other tradition, an occlusion that also renders invisible the optionality of the foundational assumptions of modernity, and hence shield them from critical reflection, I consider it necessary to briefly enumerate them. The distinct aspects of modernity to which the unified subject gives rise are the following:

1. The first aspect is the Modern desire for certainty and hence for a single method or closed system that will guarantee certainty, or what comes to be known as Metaphysics, a metaphysics radically distinct from the premodern desire for truth which, in principle, cannot be attained as such by any subject³³ or be pursued by a single method. The latter desire succinctly named by Aristotle's "*orektikos nous* or *orexis dianoetike*"³⁴ is manifest in a comportment or ethos that regards method, especially the dialectical method, literally as a mode of inquiry into difficulties (*aporiae*, *problemata*) on the way to first principles, rather than posits, let alone constructs, a universal method.³⁵
2. The second is the subjective construction of concepts (Descartes), political science (Hobbes), language (Leibniz), and system (Kant) that can guarantee a universal method, a construction that requires that intelligibility would reside

³³ "The investigation of truth is in one sense difficult, in another sense easy . . . and while each of us contributes nothing or little to the truth, a considerable amount of it results from all our contributions." Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 993a30–993b5.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b5.

³⁵ See Aristotle, *Topica* 1. It must also be recalled that the book handed down to us as Aristotle's *Metaphysics* received its name by being placed after the *Physics* and that its emphasis on the many-wayness of saying "being" (*to on polachos legatai*) or any other "category" belies its subsequent understanding as an attempt to construct a foundational science. The unification of science under a mathematical model is a mark of the success of the erosion or disappearance of the Aristotelian prohibition against *metabasis*. Even if we limit ourselves to the theoretical sciences, as distinct from ethics/politics, the change is especially striking in the case of natural science and astronomy. Insofar as these sciences study bodies in motion, motion and change constitute primary principles in these sciences. In contrast, mathematics studies bodies without motion, abstracting both time and respect. See Funkestein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*.

strictly in the knowing subject rather than be understood as arising from a relation between a sensing knower (“subject of experience”) and a sensible known (“object of experience”). In this manner, indeed, concrete material experience becomes both “vulgar” and unnecessary for, in fact harmful to, knowledge.³⁶

3. Third is the emergence of the isolated individual, the thinking and/or believing I,³⁷ whose unity and self-identity are guaranteed by a preexisting subjective consciousness that posits itself objectively, that is, as a fully present unchanging identity, in order to cognize itself as a knower and, hence, as the condition for the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever.
4. Fourth is the understanding of time and history as, or more precisely their conflation into, a single linear progression, as distinct from, or more precisely as a rejection of, natural recurrent time.³⁸ Concomitant with the conflation of time and history precisely as the rejection of natural time, or of a time that does not come to an end/judgment, is the separation between natural necessity (the domain of mechanical causality, bodies, passions) and human freedom

³⁶ “For there is nothing more harmful, or more unworthy of a philosopher, than the vulgar appeal to an allegedly contrary experience, which would not have existed at all if the above measures had been taken at the right time in accordance with ideas, and if crude concepts, for the very reason that they were derived from experience, had not instead vitiated every good intention.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Logic II, Dialectic I, i: Of Ideas in General. Kant’s disdain for vulgar experience is equally and more poignantly evident throughout the political writings. Because it is often argued that Kant’s political writings are precritical, I refer to the First Critique here in order to highlight the consistency between the Political and the Critical writings concerning the status of experience in Kant’s thought.

³⁷ The concomitant historical emergence of the Protestant individual, whose relation to belief is *sole fide*, and the Cartesian *ego cogitans* cannot be overemphasized. Although both “individuals” share a distrust for authority and hence seem to eschew dogmata, both also share a foundational belief in the idea of God, an idea that individuates the “I,” whose self-evidence both guarantees and is guaranteed by the separability of the self-subsistent soul.

³⁸ I deploy the term *recurrent* rather than *cyclical*, lest nature be understood as a complete or completable enclosed system.

(the domain of history, final causality, reason, free will, and human action).³⁹

5. As a consequence of the foregoing, is the separation between theory and practice, knowledge and action, whereby action (*praxis/ergon/poiesis/technē*) is understood strictly as the application of knowledge. As a further consequence, reason, let alone ethics and politics, becomes progressively instrumental. More precisely, ethics/politics disappears and is displaced by moral philosophy, whose concern is individual felicity or salvation (*salus*) rather than political well-being (*salus publica*).
6. Sixth is the emergence of the nation-state, which depends upon the construction of the myth, or the mythopoesis of the state of nature,⁴⁰ the realm of strife, unfreedom, and/or want, from which the purportedly prepolitical, fully constituted individual must escape by alienating her individual will to the common will of civil society, a common will that, in turn, is alienated to the “elected” sovereign will (be it of the many, few, or one) in order to safeguard individual freedom.
7. Finally, what follows from a number of the previous constituent aspects of Christo-Platonic Modernity is the absolute permission to conquer or subdue nature (body/other/Jew) as the condition of both knowledge and “progressive” freedom.⁴¹

³⁹ See, e.g., Kant’s “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” (“Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht,” 1784).

⁴⁰ Again, I wish to underscore the difference between “the state of nature” and “the natural state,” mentioned earlier. See [Chapter 2](#), Part 2, “The Commonwealth,” and note 12.

⁴¹ I emphasize the Christo-Platonic origins of the modern ethos, once again, in the context of what can be understood as freedom, not at all because I am fond of repetition but because in the current political climate I believe that it cannot be overemphasized. This is also the climate that accounts for what I described earlier as the urgency evident in current Spinoza scholarship, however diverse it may be. For the Christian origin of modern science, see Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, and Kojève, “On the Christian Origins of Modern Science.”

I would also like to note and underline the facts that (1) most of these elements are common to all formulations of Modern philosophy, Analytic as well as Continental, empiricist, rationalist, or idealist; (2) the pre-Modern tradition of philosophy from which it emerges is decidedly Christo-Platonic so that its Plato and Aristotle, *inter alii*, are “baptized,” or must be sanctioned by ecclesiastico-political permission; and (3) the view of nature, embodiment, and desire that the Christo-Platonic appropriation of ancient philosophy presents can clearly be traced back to the Christian notion of original sin, and its views of progressive history can clearly be traced to Augustine’s theology of history that separates the city of men [*sic*] from the city of God.⁴² The only difference between the Augustinian *Weltanschauung* and that of the Enlightenment culminating in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*⁴³ is that, in the latter case, the eschaton is immanentized, and redemption not only can but *will* be brought about by progressive human rationality and free will.

Although each one of these aspects could serve to motivate a separate lengthy study of the epistemic status of what is taken to be real, my concern in this chapter is limited to making amply evident their theologico-political origins and the optionality of the single canon of philosophy and its history. More important, since it is my claim that the force of Spinoza’s critique derives from another tradition whose idiom is not only strange to the modern reader but also repulsive to her precisely because it challenges the strongly held and defended opinions about a founding father of the reigning tradition rather than engaging in a polemos further than necessary in this broad-survey part of this chapter, I shall first address very briefly the consequences of these “foundational” concepts in Kant’s and Hegel’s political philosophy, and their striking, if oft ignored, antisemitism, a densely layered antisemitism resulting from multiple expulsions of the Jews, material

⁴² Augustine, *City of God*.

⁴³ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*.

as well as theoretical.⁴⁴ Since Kant and Hegel are the giant obstacles, so to speak, to uncovering another materialist tradition informing Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno, precisely insofar as they are also their main philosophical interlocutors, I first focus on their thought, especially on their moral philosophy, politics, and history, and then turn to a consideration of negative dialectics as a *species* of negative theology materially and historically understood in order to situate the difference between the two traditions now in the precise terms of the erasure of the Jewish by the Judaeo-Christian, of ethics/politics by ontotheology.

The suppression of an other Aristotelian materialist tradition from the canon is accompanied or “complemented” by two other expulsions subsequent to the medieval condemnations: the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula and their dispersion throughout Europe and the “transformation” (or transsubstantiation) of Jews into a concept and a question. It is noteworthy and ironic that the condemnation marked a decidedly antitheoretical shift in the seat of ecclesiastico-political power, a shift that affected the status of the Jew. On one hand, the theological arguments for the importance of the Jew for the escathon, first as exemplar of the misery of those who deny Jesus’ divinity and second as those whose voluntary conversion will usher the escathon, were replaced either by sheer violent forced conversions – conversions which, nonetheless, were never successful enough, never fully believable, and hence neither assured the

⁴⁴ There is certainly a vast literature on the antisemitism of philosophy, especially German Idealism, but this literature is almost exclusively the work of Jewish intellectual historians and remains invisible in the works of most philosophers working on Kant and Hegel. An excellent recent study that also provides a good, comprehensive reference list to other works is Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew*. I must note, however, that I disagree with several key arguments of these works and believe that they are often based on serious misreadings of Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno. The most important of these misreadings will be addressed throughout the book beginning with the discussion of negative dialectics in the last section of this chapter. More important, I want to emphasize the fact that my concern here is not with antisemitism per se but rather with the occlusions occasioned by the myth of the single philosophical tradition and the nature of Modernity and Enlightenment.

second coming nor granted the former Jews with equal status – or by mass expulsion decreed by monarchs whose power doubled through their excessive display of piety.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the rearticulation of power rendered the Jews both unnecessary and superfluous to the economy of salvation and hence to its political expression as the “Jewish question.” It is this superfluous status that reemerges in Kant’s and Hegel’s expulsion of the Jews from the commonwealth (literally, public health) and history.

II. Kant and Hegel: Precursors to Bruno Bauer

It is no exaggeration to claim that the transformation of the relation between necessity and possibility is the *sine qua non* for understanding Kant’s disdain for “vulgar” experience and the transformation of the question of freedom from a concrete political and historical question to a metaphysical question. I wish to suggest that it is also this transformation that renders the Jew (in contradistinction from individual human beings who happened to be Jewish) as a scandalon for Kant, a scandalon whose embodiment doubles as the scandalon at the heart of Kant’s moral philosophy.

Before proceeding, and in anticipation of the charge of anachronistic opportunism, a charge I have been known to level against others, in evaluating Kant’s and Hegel’s judgments about the Jews, judgment often explained away, or rather “justified,” as reflecting the spirit of the age, I reply simultaneously no and yes. No, because this is not an anachronistic reading but rather a historical retrieving of the origins of these *prejudices* and their concrete de- and trans-formations in order to render them literally historically unnecessary and therefore untrue; yes, because indeed I seek to show that they reflect the spirit of the age and that they remain as a presence in and an *uncritical* center of the

⁴⁵ For a succinct but equally insightful argument for the overwhelming, doubled power of reign, piety, and cruelty, see Machiavelli’s discussions of Pope Alexander VI and King Ferdinand of Aragon in *The Prince*, especially Chapters XI and XXI, respectively.

thought of the two pillars of critical and systematic Enlightenment European philosophy.

a. Kant

Two radically distinct claims constitute Kant's judgments about the Jews and Judaism, the one based upon a true premise, even if the conclusions he draws from it are unjustified, the other pure prejudice. Although it is tempting to argue that the latter does not inform the former, it, too, is unjustified. Briefly, the first premise exiles the Jews from religion and hence from universal Church history, or more precisely from the history of faith to which Judaism is said to be opposed as mere positive, that is, political law devoid of any moral content. Hence Kant argues, "Judaism is *really not a religion at all* but merely a union of a number of people who, since they belonged to a particular stock, formed themselves into a commonwealth under purely political laws and not into a church."⁴⁶ Rather than evaluate Kant's arguments for his exclusion of the Jews from religion, and before proceeding, I cannot overemphasize one especially peculiar and surprising dimension of Kant's claim, namely, that Jewish strict monotheism and iconoclasm are a primary cause of Judaism's inability, in fact, inhibition to the development of moral inclination. Moreover, in contrast, Kant argues in favor of polytheism as enabling moral development. "Religion would be more likely to arise from a belief in many mighty invisible beings of this order, provided a people conceived of these as all agreeing amid their 'departmental' differences to bestow their good pleasure only upon the man who cherishes virtue with all his heart."⁴⁷ I can think of no claim as perverse as that which insists that false, puerile, subjective superstition is a superior ground for morality as opposed to law. It is especially worthy of note that this claim is the contradictory of Spinoza's critique of religion beginning with the Appendix to *Ethics* I.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, this claim is also consistent

⁴⁶ Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 116. My emphasis.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴⁸ The following chapter addresses Spinoza's critique of religion and its influence on Marx.

with Kant's claim about the cunning and purposiveness of nature and the teleology of history throughout the political writings as well as in *The Critique of Judgment*. Indeed, nothing empirical would convince Kant otherwise, as his familiarity with virtuous Jews, including Mendelssohn, proves. Thus, indeed, Kant grants that individual Jews can attain universal morality, *despite* their adherence to Judaism as members of the human species.

Kant's claim that Judaism is a strictly a legal-political tradition, that is, that it is an orthopraxy, is certainly true. What is puzzling, however, is that this is the ground for its condemnation, especially since, for one seeking a religion within the bounds of reason alone, it should be its virtue; for Judaism does not instill religious dogmata and hence cannot per se be opposed to reason alone. It is true, and, as Yovel points out, ironic, that Kant's sources for these claims are Jewish, especially Mendelssohn and Spinoza, but it is equally true that Kant ignores or even distorts the philosophical consequences they derive from this.⁴⁹

Kant's second generic claim about Jews and Judaism is not only pure prejudice but also one based upon popular, deliberate Christian distortion. More important, it is this distortion that justifies Kant's exclusion of the Jew from the commonwealth. And this distortion informs Kant's moral philosophy. Briefly stated, Kant repeatedly claims both in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and in *Lectures on Ethics* that the Jews are a nation of cowards and liars, a national constitution whose origin he attributes to the Talmud, and one which in the *Anthropology* is also claimed to constitute the Jews as a nation of merchants. It is for this reason that Kant argues that whereas a well-governed commonwealth can protect a multiplicity of religions, it cannot extend this toleration to the Jews. And here, in the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant not only excludes Judaism from religion but further claims that the principles Jews pursue in accord with the Talmud,

⁴⁹ Yovel, *Dark Riddle*. Careful, nuanced, and thorough as Yovel's analyses are in trying to understand this "dark riddle" at the heart of philosophy, he too fails to point out the indifference of Judaism to dogmata and hence its neutrality to philosophy.

which permits the practice of deceit, are “adverse to the state.” Thus, so long as the Jew remains a Jew, she can neither be free nor become a member of civil society. In the *Anthropology* Kant provides two distinct accounts of the causes for the constitution (*Verfassung*) of the Jews as a nation of liars and merchants, accounts he presents as mutually constitutive but which, in fact, can be seen to be in tension with one another, were “vulgar,” that is, empirical history really to inform its historical claim. The first account is misleading because of its partial and ungenerous presentation of the fact of exile: Jews became cheaters “because of their spirit of usury since the exile.” Admitting that “it is hard to conceive of a *nation* of cheaters,” Kant presents the former “genetic” character as coextensive with the equally peculiar “genetic” fact that the Jews are a nation of merchants “bound by an ancient superstition that is recognized by the State they live in, seek no civil dignity, and try to make up for this loss by the advantage of duping people among whom they find refuge and even one another.” The ancient superstition is Jewish law. Especially troubling is Kant’s transformation of a historical and theologico-political condition into a genetic one. Jews indeed, by decree, were forced to be “non-productive members of society.” In fact, they were not members of society, properly speaking. Nor is Kant ignorant of the fact that Jews were indeed seeking “civil dignity.” His exchanges with Mendelssohn, and Hertz, *inter alii*, speak for themselves. Formally, it appears as if it is Jewish law or constitution (*Verfassung*) that both literally and figuratively constitutes the Jews as a *peculiar nation*, exiles Judaism from religion, and is opposed to the moral law and hence is harmful to other, well-governed nations. Kant thus repeats the oldest Christian claim: Jewish law is the law of the members opposed to the law of the heart; it is the chaff that is discarded in favor of the Christian grain. Jews will cease to be a *nation* of cheaters and merchants once they cease to be Jews. And yet, the anti-Jewish, seemingly rationally grounded judgment occasionally appears at a much deeper, more affective level. Thus, despite previous praise of Solomon Maimon’s understanding of his philosophy in a letter (May 26, 1789) to Hertz (a Jew), in a later letter to Reinhold

(a Christian rival of Maimon), Kant makes derogatory claims about Maimon (and Jews in general), seeking to gain importance on the bases of others' accomplishments (March 28, 1794). Hard to stomach, yes – true, nonetheless.

Now, finally, there is a kernel of truth to Kant's claim that the Talmud permits lying, a kernel that is grotesquely distorted. The Torah and the Talmud are replete with explicit prohibitions against lying, including the famous saying of Rabbi Shimeon ben-Gamliel: "The world endures on three things: justice, truth, peace" (Babylonian Talmud, Avot, 1:18).⁵⁰ Nevertheless, there are circumstances where the Talmud permits lying, of which the most notable and numerous are for the sake of peace. Viewed in the light of Rabbi Shimeon's dictum, peace is the highest good toward which justice and truth strive. Thus understood, Peace is to Judaism what Charity (*Caritas*, "Love") is to Christianity; peace is an ethical/political good, love an individual one.

It is thus especially ironic and noteworthy that Kant's best advice to the Jews requires deception. In the *Contest of the Faculties*, Kant advises the Jews to *publicly* adopt Christianity and to study the New Testament but to interpret it in accord with morality and Enlightenment. According to Kant, only by means of such deception could Jews be granted equality and citizenship and at the same time overcome historical religions and adopt the religion of reason. It is noteworthy that, Kant describes this transition as the euthanasia of Judaism. Only by deceiving others could the Jew cease to be a deceiver?⁵¹

b. Hegel

If Kant's antisemitism has received relatively meager philosophical attention, Hegel's received extensive attention, often conflicting, and more often apologetic, albeit to different degrees. As in the case of Kant, so in the case of Hegel, my concern is not

⁵⁰ It is worth noting that Avot is considered to be "The Ethics of the Fathers" and is central to Maimonides' ethics/politics. In addition to his commentary on Avot, Maimonides composed a lengthy introduction to his commentary known under the title "Eight Chapters."

⁵¹ Kant, *The Contest of the Faculties*, 93–95.

with their antisemitism or personal attitudes toward Jews but rather with the place of “the Jew” and Judaism in their philosophy, and especially its concrete political consequences. Whereas Kant remains consistent in his philosophical attitude toward the Jews, Hegel did not, or rather the changes in his attitude are harder to assess or even explain consistently. Rather than enter the fray of the debates well represented and surveyed in Mack and Yovel, I shall limit my discussion to a brief consideration of two dialectically opposed moments in Hegel’s philosophical discussion and point to the ironic destiny of his thought. There can be no disagreement that Hegel’s views about the Jews underwent radical transformations that are well documented by Yovel. Thus, whereas his earlier writings are rather vitriolically anti-semitic, the vitriol and even the predominant, that is, concrete political form of antisemitism disappears from his later writings, especially from the *Philosophy of Right*.

Rather than begin with the place of Jews in history and the state in Hegel’s thought, I begin with what may appear anecdotal but in fact sheds light on the distortion of the history of philosophy by the philosophy of history or rather the unified unfolding of Spirit in time, or rationalization of the real. Unlike Kant or his successors, Hegel acknowledges Arabic philosophy in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, *The Lectures of 1825–1826*, *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, and includes Maimonides, whom he later identifies as a Jew, among the Arab philosophers, where he should indeed be included, but for the wrong reasons. There are two especially striking and strange aspects to Hegel’s reading: first, he derives all the substantive information he presents from Maimonides and misreads Maimonides. Thus, from Maimonides’ radical critique of Kalam and the Mutakallimun, the dialectical theologians who are, inter alia, the butt of Maimonides’ criticism of the relation between the real and the rational, Hegel derives a positive assessment of the Mutakallimun (whom he names *meddaberin*, using a transliteration of the Hebrew translation) as “one outstanding philosophical school or sect among the Arabs.” Second, and stranger still, is Hegel’s presentation of their thought as a form of Pantheism or

Spinozism, “equating God and Substance, the standpoint or general outlook of Oriental, Turkish, Persian, and Arabic writers, historians or philosophers,” a standpoint of “abstract negativity and complete dissolution,” a claim later repeated in his discussion of Spinoza. Concerning Maimonides, Hegel gets not only his historical facts mixed up, mistaking his places of birth and death (Cordova and Cairo, respectively) but also his philosophical ones, claiming that “like the church fathers and Philo, he takes the historical configuration as fundamental and treats it metaphysically.”⁵² Now, first, nowhere in his critique of Kalam atomism does Maimonides present their thought to equate God and substance; on the contrary. Nor does Maimonides regard the Mutakallimun as philosophers. Second, while the church fathers were indeed influenced by Philo – Judeus to Christians, the Alexandrian to Jews – Maimonides was not, on the contrary.⁵³ Third, and most important, Maimonides was first and foremost a political philosopher, as were his preeminent Arabic interlocutors, especially al-Farabi and Ibn-Rushd. In fact, in a chapter preceding the critique of Kalam atomism, Maimonides cites al-Farabi when he accuses the Mutakallimun of seeking to conform what exists to their imagination rather than conforming their imagination to what exists; unable to distinguish between contrariety and contradiction, they invert the relation between the necessary and the possible.

What should be clear even from this brief discussion is that Hegel’s reading of the history of philosophy is thoroughly shaped by his understanding of world history and the place of the Orient within it. But, for that very reason, what is especially strange about it is the ignoring of chronology in this presentation, relegating Arabic philosophy to the Orient and abstract negativity despite the fact that he acknowledges that the Arabs had interest in the arts and classical Greek philosophy and that much of

⁵² Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 3:39. It is worth noting that Hegel possessed the 1629 Latin translation of Maimonides’ *Guide* by Johannes Buxtorf.

⁵³ See Dobbs-Weinstein, *Maimonides and St. Thomas on the Limits of Reason* and “Jewish Philosophy.”

Arabic philosophy is commentary on Aristotle's works. That is, Hegel ignores or covers over real Arabic philosophy, replacing it with Kalam as the dominant form of Arabic philosophy. The same strange ignoring of his own chronology of world history, from the Orient to Greece and the Modern (European) World, whose apex is Germany, occurs in Hegel's discussion of Spinoza.

Hegel's decisive misreading and misrepresentation are further evident in his treatment of Spinoza, especially the covering over of his political philosophy and its relation to Maimonides. Hegel's intervention in the Spinoza controversy is thus a one-sided or undialectical one. For the accusations against Spinoza are twofold and are directed at both the *Ethics* and the TTP. From the reading of the *Ethics* as a metaphysics arise simultaneously the accusation of pantheism and the description of Spinoza as "a god intoxicated man." From a Christo-Platonic reading of the TTP independently of the *Ethics* as well as from concrete theologico-political interests arise the multiple accusations of heresy. However we interpret the relation between Maimonides and Spinoza, the TTP is directly engaged with Maimonides' work, and its mode of engagement is decidedly political; Hegel's ignoring of the TTP is thus a direct political or theologico-political intervention in the Spinoza controversy, a fact that could not have been lost to Hegel, the careful reader of Jacobi's *Über der Lehre des Spinoza*.

Hegel's justification of the expulsion of the Jews from world history, even as that prehistory of the "political" Orient, is the result of the fact that the Hebrew Commonwealth and Judaism for Hegel are the realm of absolute unfreedom, an unfreedom whereby even in the act of being set free the Jews remain slaves, their freedom happens to them without being exacted by them and hence without consciousness of freedom. In fact, properly speaking, the Hebrew Commonwealth for Hegel is no commonwealth, perhaps it is even an antistate; for its elaborate laws are not the expression of a consciousness of freedom nor can give rise to it. Consciousness of freedom is the condition *sine qua non* of entering into world history. In contrast, in the Orient, "people do yet know that the Spirit – the human as such – is free.

Because they do not know this, they are not free. They know only *one* person is free.” Consciousness of freedom arises first in the Greek and Roman world, a consciousness that some are free. It is only in Christianity that consciousness emerges as the recognition of freedom as the freedom of every human, in virtue of being human. Judaism is thus indeed the absolute negativity opposed to Christianity. That is why, unlike other eras and peoples whose historical and dialectical existence is preserved as it is overcome, Judaism cannot be thus preserved. It remains an archaic anomaly that persists alongside world history and the state.

Yet, it is in relation to the place of Jews in the Modern state, that is, in Weimar Germany, that the difference between Kant and Hegel emerges most starkly. Whereas Kant “imagines” an escape for Jews from concrete, empirical history into moral (metaphysical) freedom by deception, in virtue of which the Jew can attain concrete, “vulgar” freedom, Hegel acknowledges the strange and anomalous persistence of the Jews not merely as a historical specter but as a reality in the Modern state. Thus, irrespective of earlier sentiment about Jews and their expulsion from world history as an agent of freedom, in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel recommends granting Jews full civil rights because they are “men” [*sic*]. Succinct as this recommendation is, and despite its seemingly marginal status, relegated as it is to a long asterisk comment, Hegel’s argument here is dialectically subtle and complex. Unlike religious sects, such as Anabaptist, Quakers, and so on, who may be regarded *only* as members of civil society or as private persons and hence toward whom the state can exercise an attitude of “pure toleration,” exempting them from certain duties, Jews should be granted unrestricted civil right. Against the formal claim that Jews are not merely a religious sect but in fact a *foreign race* (and indeed, against Kant), Hegel first argues here that “feeling of selfhood infinite and free from *all restrictions*, is the root from which the desired similarity in disposition and ways of thinking comes into being.”⁵⁴ But, in addition, Hegel argues for full Jewish emancipation from the

⁵⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 169.

nature of the State as the actuality of the ethical Idea in which the individual self-consciousness finds its substantive freedom, as its essence and the end and product of its activity,⁵⁵ a self-consciousness that Hegel attributes to a sentiment toward the State, that is, a “feeling of selfhood” in relation to the State. In contrast to Kant, Hegel explicitly situates the isolation for which the Jews are reproached (i.e., the tribal nature) in history and institutions. And finally, Hegel argues from experience that to exclude the Jews (even if the State has the “highest right,” i.e., the formal right to do so) “is the silliest folly, and the way in which governments now treat them has proved itself to be both prudent and dignified.”⁵⁶ To deny civil rights to Jews would be to contradict the nature of the State as “absolutely rational.”

It is thus profoundly ironic that Hegel’s heirs, especially Feuerbach and Bauer, not only ignore this recommendation but also revert back to Kant’s prejudices; it also thereby makes evident the depth and extent of philosophical antisemitism, an antisemitism that, as I shall argue throughout the following chapters, makes amply evident Spinoza’s claim that mind is nothing but the idea of body which in its Marxian form reads that self-consciousness is nothing but the expression of the concrete, material institutions. But, as Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno will also make evident merely formal changes in institutions, merely granting Jews and other others civil rights is no emancipation; for civil rights are not coextensive with human rights, or, as Marx will point out, an abyss separates civil society from socialized humanity. Against Hegel’s view of the state as well as Bauer’s texts on the Jewish question, Marx turns to Spinoza’s radical critique of religion as well as his discussion of the Hebrew Commonwealth in TTP, as will become evident in [Chapter 2](#).

It is both ironic and remarkable that Hegel was able to overcome his personal prejudice on the basis of reason, or rather the

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 169. It is worth noting that the *Philosophy of Right* was published in 1821, thirty years after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Prussia granted civil rights to Jews in 1811, but as Knox points out in the notes, there was a virulent outbreak of antisemitism in 1819, when Hegel was writing the book.

purported rationality of the State. Yet, it is dialectically contradictory precisely because, at the personal level of morality, of self-consciousness, for Hegel, feeling grounds reason. Irrespective, Hegel's achievement is contradicted by the irrationality of the real, provided that by the real we refer to concrete, material, historical experience. This contradiction is taken up after Marx and, more important, after Auschwitz, by Benjamin and Adorno. Against the formal equality of civil rights, Benjamin, following Marx, will present the institutional irrationality of the real most succinctly, stating that "[w]hile there is a beggar, there is a myth."⁵⁷ And Adorno, after Auschwitz, will state quite simply that "the whole is false."⁵⁸

Whereas the first part of this introductory chapter traces the theologico-political unification of the canon through the occlusion of an other materialist, Aristotelian tradition, an occlusion and repression whose preeminent Modern expression is Spinoza's, Part II seeks to uncover another dialectical materialist history in which the radical distance between Judaism and Christianity is explored through an examination of Adorno's negative dialectics as a radical Jewish *species* of Negative Theology, a thoroughly political one, against his appropriation into a Christian apophatic discourse.

Part II. Toward a Materialist History: Negative Dialectics as a Radical, Secular, or Jewish Species of Negative Theology

The cognitive Utopia would be to use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual with concepts without making it their equal.

– ND, 10

What clings to the image remains idolatry, mythic enthrallment.

– ND, 205

Just as Adorno opens up the Preface to *Negative Dialectics* with the bold claim that "negative dialectics is a phrase that flouts

⁵⁷ Benjamin, as quoted in Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 203.

⁵⁸ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 50.

tradition” (*verstösst gegen die Überlieferung*),⁵⁹ so do I wish to begin my considerations of negative dialectics, the book as well as model of philosophy it practices and proposes, with the bold claim that negative dialectics as a secular *or* (*sive*) Jewish negative theology is a phrase that flouts tradition. But, what does flouting tradition mean? Why and how flout it? And, more important for the following discussion and subsequent chapters, whose tradition? These questions are not *mere* provocations, although they certainly aim to provoke. That Adorno closes the Preface with the anticipation of “attacks to which *Negative Dialectics* will expose him,” that this anticipation proved to be “prophetic,” and that, irrespective of their diversity, both the attacks and defenses often have an *ad hominem* component and manifest a need to distance him from or proximate him to Judaism, indicate the need to ask these questions. And, as will become evident, the question of tradition will also become the question of what is meant by “tradition.” Since there is an unbridgeable abyss between the two traditions at the heart of these debates, an abyss willfully invisible to one, all too visible to the other tradition, and since I wish to propose a critical model of the relation between “negative dialectics” and “theology” that flouts the one generally agreed upon by both opponents and exponents of Adorno, I must first briefly but critically engage the model of religion and theology prevalent in the debates about Adorno.

I. A Detour into History: The Hyphen⁶⁰

In the opening paragraph of a chapter entitled “The Hyphen,” J.-F. Lyotard, “speaking as a novice,” takes a risk

⁵⁹ The intransitive verbal formulation “*verstossen gegen*” commonly means to offend or violate – i.e., it has a violent implication.

⁶⁰ I borrow the provocative and very apt subtitle for this polemos from Lyotard and Gruber, *The Hyphen*. Although I have strong reservations about Lyotard’s reading of Adorno and focus on a different interpretative approach to Hebrew scripture than he, I agree with his presentation of the nature and scope of the abyss between Judaism and Christianity.

of approaching a suffering of the breath and of the flesh, of the two together, a suffering that is perhaps the most impenetrable abyss within Western thought. I will be speaking of a white space or blank [*blanc*], the one that is crossed out by the *trait* or line uniting Jew and Christian in the expression “Judaeo-Christian.”⁶¹

As Lyotard’s poignant opening lines succinctly indicate, not only is the Judaeo-Christian tradition Christian, but its mode of being Christian constitutes the violent theologico-political history of Western thought as well as its politics.⁶²

Unlike Lyotard, I am not a novice, although I did not discover the term or concept “Judaeo-Christianity,” let alone as a single religious tradition common to Jews and Christians, until I was an adult, nor could it have been discovered until relatively recently. More important, neither the term nor the concept “Judaeo-Christian” would have been coherent to the foremost medieval Jewish philosopher, RaMBaM or Moses Maimonides, in contrast to Judaeo-Arabic, for example, the language in which he composed his philosophical and scientific works. I choose Maimonides as exemplar judiciously since he was simultaneously a radical Aristotelian philosopher and the strictest advocate of negative predication of the divine names, arguing that the relation between all biblical attributes predicated of both god and humans is one of pure equivocation – a pure homonym. Moreover, Maimonides was the most esteemed medieval Jewish philosopher in the Christian, Latin West, and his influence upon Christian philosophers was most extensive, including, *inter multi alii*, St. Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, two Christian philosophers presented as practitioners of apophatic philosophy.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶² It cannot be overemphasized that the abyss of which I speak is one created by ecclesiastico-political violence; it does not extend to the relation between Judaism and Christianity as religious tradition, let alone undermine or preclude a highly mediated dialectic between the two traditions; on the contrary. Maimonides’ influence on St. Thomas Aquinas, on which I have written extensively, is but one example of this dialectical relation.

Just as Judaeo-Christianity is a Christian mode of erasing the Judaic by incorporation through supersession, so is the incorporation of Jewish "theology" into the apophatic tradition. I must admit that I am, at best, hard-pressed to understand what Habermas or Finlayson, the exemplary negative and positive interpreters of Adorno's purported mysticism, mean by Jewish thought and/or sources. Ironically, Habermas's and Finlayson's philosophical evaluations of the apophatic, respectively negative and positive, determines their respective evaluation of Adorno's Jewish affiliation. Whereas Habermas acknowledges Adorno's Jewish milieu and influences, Finlayson is at great pains to deny these. And it is poignantly ironic that it is precisely the elements that Habermas identifies as Jewish in Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) thought that he also condemns as irrational, contradictory, or bad philosophy. Conversely, and against Habermas *et idem alii*, Finlayson rescues Adorno as a philosopher by baptism, immersing him as it were in the waters of the Christian apophatic tradition of the Pseudo Dionysus and Meister Eckhart, a tradition that, at its most consistent, requires not only negation but also remotion.

More important, I find especially troubling, even appalling, not only in Habermas and Finlayson but in the general literature about Adorno, the fact that what is identified as Jewish is almost entirely restricted to Kabbalah, or some cognate form of mysticism, rather than philosophy, literature, music, etc. Against this prevalent reading I wish to emphasize the facts that, in addition to the proximity and intimacy between Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer, personal as well as philosophical, Adorno writes on Kafka, Bloch, Schoenberg, Kraus, Heine, Lucaks, Mann, Proust, Mahler, *et alii*. Among his collaborators as well as fellow émigrés are Marcuse, Pollock, Löwenhal, Krakauer, Eisler, Mann, *et alii*. That Adorno was certainly familiar with German Jewish philosophy, in general, the Marburg Neo-Kantian School, in particular, is clearly evident from the 1934 correspondence with Benjamin about *theology*. In this light, and in the context of the question of tradition, it cannot be overemphasized that the foremost Marburg Neo-Kantian of the first part of the twentieth century,

Hermann Cohen, was especially concerned with the relation between reason and revelation, especially Judaism, and that several of his writings on religion attempted to synthesize Kant and Judaism, just as his preeminent predecessor, Maimonides, attempted to harmonize Aristotle and Hebrew scripture. Exemplary among these are *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (1919) and *The Ethics of Maimonides* (*Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis*, 1908). Finally, Adorno was certainly familiar with Scholem's interpretation of the Kabbalah.⁶³

Be that as it may, the "Meditations on Metaphysics," at the end of *Negative Dialectics*, makes clear the fact that "after Auschwitz," Adorno fully identified himself as a Jew, compelled as he was by material history. For, indeed, Auschwitz embodied the diabolical execution of the Jewish matrilineal law of descent, a law governing four generations. As Adorno states or confesses,

it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you can no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living.

Presenting such survival as ridden by drastic guilt, Adorno characterizes the response to it as a nightmare atonement: he who was spared "will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier."⁶⁴

Now, if our sources and influences, rather than our birthright, constitute our philosophical identity, then with one exception all my graduate students, past and present, are "jews," although few are Jewish. The most significant way in which most of them

⁶³ Habermas acknowledges Adorno's Jewish context in the most insensitive, indeed barely disguised anti-Jewish intellectual, negative description of Adorno's and Horkheimer's time warp after they returned to Germany in "Dual Layered Time." There can be no philosophical response to this vulgar display of envy and *Freudenschade*, and I certainly cannot offer one.

⁶⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362–63.

are Jews is their reading of the philosophical tradition against its Christian grain, the grain in virtue of which the “Jews” as concept is the unassimilated, inassimilable other, heteronymous to the Western philosophical tradition and the modern European nation-state.

Rather than go into too great detail arguing against these discussions, I shall very briefly outline the major differences between the two traditions with respect to what is named “negative theology,” a Christian naming, and subsequently discuss what all ignore, and thereby occlude, which ignoring also entails a misreading of the utopian moment in Adorno’s thought or the standpoint of redemption, “whose reality or unreality hardly matters.”⁶⁵

Insofar as the majority of the literature discusses Adorno’s “negative theology” in relation to the prohibition against graven images, I must begin with this rather telling association. When negative theology is considered in the light of medieval philosophy or theology, the underlying premise, explicit or implicit, informing the association between the negation of divine names and the ban on graven images is that the analogy of predication is the expression of the analogy of being. This is anachronistic even in the Christian tradition, certainly in the case of Aquinas,⁶⁶ and it is false in the Judaeo-Arabic context. Nonetheless, this worry makes evident one of the major differences between the two traditions. An analogy of being in the Christian context is a worry precisely because “god became man.” It is an onto-theological,⁶⁷ strictly Christian worry that gives rise to indefinitely many forms of nominalist–realist debates but, ironically, is of little interest to either philosophical or theological versions of medieval negative theology. In the context of the debates about Adorno, the worry

⁶⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Finale.

⁶⁶ See Ashworth’s excellent article about the status of analogy in Aquinas, “Analogy and Equivocation.”

⁶⁷ Although “onto-theology” is a term coined by Kant in reference to Anselm’s argument for God’s existence, its origins precede Anselm, and, more important, in relation to Anselm, it is applied more aptly to his *Cur Deus Homo* than to the *Proslogion*.

is about the relation between word and image or language and representation. Thus, ironically, it is a version of the nominalist-realist debate after Leibniz, Kant, and Brentano,⁶⁸ again, a decidedly Christian, onto-theological worry. Nonetheless, insofar as one of Adorno's central concerns is the presentation of what is in excess of the concept, as well as the violence wrought by the concept, a concern that earns him (and Horkheimer) Habermas's vitriolic and spiteful attacks,⁶⁹ the association is understandable but wrong and misleading.

In contrast to the Latin Western presentation and identification of the bans, it is important to underscore the fact that in their Hebrew form, the two prohibitions are against (1) *making* graven images and (2) bearing god's name in vain. That is, the first prohibition concerns the worship of idols, a worship that in that concrete historical context required human sacrifice; the second prohibition concerns bearing false witness or lying. It is not surprising, therefore, that for Maimonides, both in the case of graven images and in the case of divine names, the foremost concern is political rather than onto-theological. According to Maimonides, the purpose of the entire Torah and the *raison d'être* of all the

⁶⁸ I.e., in the light of the transformation of the concept into an object (*res*) constructed by reason. Since after Leibniz, language, too, becomes a construct, the relation between "nomen" or "dictum" and "res" will depend upon the nature of the "subject" of knowledge and the metaphysical status of the "idea of God" (e.g., Descartes) or Idea (e.g., Hegel).

⁶⁹ I can think of no more reductive, trivial, and misleading a presentation of Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, and of Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as that found in Lectures III and V of Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Rather than engage it or respond to absurd claims such as the accusation of skepticism and a blindness to "existing forms of communicative rationality" or "semantic potential in myth," I shall let Adorno respond: "Direct communicability to everyone is not a criterion of truth. We must resist the all but universal compulsion to confuse the communication of knowledge with knowledge itself, and to rate it higher, if possible – whereas at present each communicative step is falsifying truth and selling it out." *Negative Dialectics*, 41. Against the charge of skepticism, or more precisely what Adorno presents as the "fear of skepticism" characteristic of "finite, abstractly intellectual thought," Adorno points out that a skeptical moment is an element of philosophy as dialectics, an element that does not remain merely negative. *Ibid.*, 16.

commandments and prohibitions is the eradication of idolatry. That is why even though he devotes almost all of *Guide* 1 to the negation of all divine predicates and argues for their strictly equivocal nature, at the very end of the *Guide*, in the penultimate paragraph of Book 3, 54, Maimonides makes one concession to positive predication of the three major attributes characterizing divine action, namely, *Hesed*, *Mishpat*, *u-Z'dakah*, "Loving-kindness," "Righteousness," and "Judgment," since these are actions worthy of imitation. *Imitatio dei* for Maimonides is thus strictly political. The reason for obedience to the law is the pursuit of justice rather than salvation. Or, happiness, understood as *eudaimonia*, can only come about in a just polity. The absence of "mercy," a divine attribute central to the Christian understanding of the divinity, is thus worth noting; for mercy, properly speaking, is a violation of justice or the law. (Mercy is not equity, *epieikeia*.) The Jewish community is a political community rather than a community of believers.

In contrast to the association of the two prohibitions informed by the Christian tradition, in the Jewish tradition, precisely because it is a tradition of a political community, the prohibition against graven images is fundamentally linked to the anti-messianic prohibition against preparation for the messiah, that is, against the future orientation of history and politics and/or the future understanding of redemption. Understood in terms of concrete material history and politics, Adorno's strict adherence to the prohibition against "graven images" is formed and informed by his conversation with Benjamin about history and against Kant's and Hegel's teleologically oriented philosophy of history. Likewise, as will become evident in the following section, for Adorno, after Auschwitz, the prohibition against images, especially in a destitute world, must be read together with the prohibition against preparation for the messianic age, that is, against a future orientation of either theory or praxis, and must be given a stringent secular turn, stripped of any association with divine sanction, in fact belying it. Negative dialectics is thus a radical overturning (or overcoming) of theology, and in a significant way, especially of negative theology or Christian mysticism.

This is precisely the sense in which negative dialectics can be understood as a secular Jewish *species* of negative theology. In this light, I wish to insist that the utopian moment in Adorno's thought can be understood only in terms of the political status and inseparability of these two prohibitions.

II. Adorno: Negative Dialectics as Inoculation against Idolatry

I see no other possibility than an extreme asceticism toward any type of revealed faith, an extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images, far beyond what this once originally meant.

– “Reason and Revelation,” *Critical Models*, 142

What is, perhaps, most “infuriating” to traditional philosophy about *Negative Dialectics* is that, from beginning to end, its mode of flouting tradition, a mode characterized by Adorno as an “anti-system,” resists any attempt at unification as a method. From beginning to end Adorno provides different definitions or descriptions of negative dialectics, many of which are negative, that is, state and elaborate either what it is not conceptually or what it is opposed to concretely, objectively. Only at the end of the book, in the very last fragment of “Meditations on Metaphysics,” does Adorno provide something akin to a more comprehensive definition of negative dialectics that, perhaps, may account for the distinct ones scattered throughout the book.

That is not to say, however, that *Negative Dialectics* lacks rigor or consistency; on the contrary, it rigorously resists reduction or unification and abstract conceptualization and instead insists on the primacy of the object, the individual, the material or what cannot be subsumed by the concept, or, more precisely, what *transcends* it. This is the only transcendence recognized by Adorno. As a secular or Jewish form of negative theology, the only transcendence possible is “vulgar,” ontic, that is, concrete, material, historical, the inverse of the mystical, spiritual, ahistorical transcendence. While both forms of negative theology seek to transcend the concept, the secular (or Jewish) form returns thinking to bodies and suffering, to objective unfreedom,

whereas the mystical, Christian one seeks to escape the latter through a flight out of politics and history and thereby, at best, trivializes suffering or becomes totally indifferent to it.

Negative Dialectics's strict adherence to the two "Jewish" bans is an expression of an historical materialism informed by and echoing Benjamin's thought, of which the most important for this chapter are the writings on Kafka and the "Theses on the Concept of History," theses that begin with the power of occult wizened theology and end with the prohibition against preparation for the messianic age – here as the prohibition against inquiring into the future – and instead call for remembrance. This disenchants the future, according to Benjamin, or in the language of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, breaks its spell, or in *Negative Dialectics* appears as the Disenchantment of the Concept.

The proximity to Benjamin is nowhere more evident than in Adorno's insistence on the unconceptual, the individual, the immersion in detail, in the disjecta of history or more precisely of historicism. Rather than abandon a concern for truth, against the necessary truth of historicism, both Benjamin and Adorno insist on the historical, and transitory, nature of truth. Benjamin's response to Gottfried Keller's claim that "the truth will not run away from us" is equally apt for Adorno, for it crystallizes the thoroughly historical nature of truth against historicism. Indeed, according to Benjamin, historical materialism pierces through historicism's timeless image. "For, it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image."⁷⁰ Thus understood, the ban on images is a ban on images as timeless rather than a ban on name or word, provided that we insist on the gap between words and things, a gap marking the "history congealed in things." Just as Benjamin's historical materialism pierces through historicism's timeless image, so does negative dialectics penetrate the hardened objects so as to expose in them

⁷⁰ Benjamin, "Theses on the Concept of History," Thesis V, in *Selected Writings*, 4:390–91.

possibility, “a possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one.”⁷¹

Against a logical or epistemological understanding of possibility, Adorno, following Benjamin, situates it historically. Insofar as *Negative Dialectics* begins with the question of the possibility of philosophy, it posits philosophy as an “object” of historical inquiry, an “object” like any other object whose lost possibility negative dialectics seeks to penetrate. Indeed, it is in terms of lost possibility that Adorno frames the question of philosophy today. As the opening sentence of the introduction succinctly states, “philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was lost.”⁷² Viewed in this light, philosophy is an historical disjecta, either destitute or transformed beyond recognition into something use-full. Situated historically, the question of philosophy becomes a question of the relation between tradition and knowledge. And, according to Adorno, the mark of Modern philosophy, whose patriarchs are Descartes and Bacon, is to radically dehistoricize the contents of thought, to render it timeless, to transform the object into an immediate, that is, fully present, datum. Ironically, the “liberation of thought from history” originating in the insistence on the autonomy of inquiry against ecclesiastical-political authority which resulted in the rejection of all tradition as superstition reinstated superstition in a more insidious, because occult, manner. The pure presence of all creation to the divinity, the identity between presence and present that constituted eternity, has now been transposed into the enthralling “idol of a pure present.”⁷³ Thus, if *Dialectics of Enlightenment* critically traces the way in which “myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology,”⁷⁴ *Negative Dialectics* critically traces the way in which Idolatry is

⁷¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 52.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

already Modern science (*scientia*) and philosophy,⁷⁵ and Modern philosophy reverts back to idolatry. Against this form of idolatry, Adorno insists on the intratemporal nature of all thinking and on its mediation by tradition. Critique is immanent precisely insofar as tradition is what mediates between known objects. Lest the question of idolatry become abstract, Adorno succinctly but precisely presents the concrete historical specificity of the inseparable relation between subject and object, that is, forms of consciousness and objective material conditions.

A knowledge conforming to the idol of that purity, of total timelessness – a knowledge coincident with formal logic – would become a tautology; there would be no more room in it *even* for transcendental logic. Timelessness, the goal which the bourgeois mind may be pursuing in order to compensate for its own mortality, is the acme of its delusion.⁷⁶

It is also if not more totalitarian and authoritarian than was the medieval *ecclesia* against which it was first developed. Indeed, idolatry is an historical form, and hence the ban on images has to respond to its specific manifestation.

Recognizing the theologico-political origin and occult as well as distorted form of an ideal knowledge purportedly freed of tradition, Adorno recalls Benjamin's form of immersion in the details of tradition as a paradoxical critique of the autonomy of the subject. "Benjamin . . . strictly foreswore the *ideal* of autonomy and submitted his thought to tradition – although to a *voluntary installed, subjectively chosen* tradition that is as unauthoritative as it accuses the autarkic thought of being."⁷⁷ Rather than abandon tradition as if that were possible through a transcendental leap, the critical relation to tradition transforms rather than escapes it. Philosophy's methexis in tradition, in the books that it criticizes, is transformative precisely because it is negative. It denies their authority rather than begrudges their importance. That is why, with Benjamin and Kafka, Adorno's model of the

⁷⁵ Where philosophy is understood as the construction of the object by the subject.

⁷⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 54. My emphasis.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 54. My emphasis.

relation between philosophical books and their interpretation is exegesis rather than hermeneutics, originating as it does in the Jewish exegetical tradition, a tradition whose primary concern is transmissibility rather than truth or a tradition in which Hag-gadah can always raise a mighty paw against the Halakhah or a tradition that is nothing other than interpretation. The historical core of truth is its transmissibility. Indeed, as the Sages of the Talmud have stated, “*Dibrah Torah Kilshon B’nei Adam*,” or the Torah speaks human language, and elsewhere, “*Shiveem Panim la-Torah*,” or the Torah has seventy faces. Thus, although it may be possible to argue for a certain similarity between Halakhic interpretation and legal hermeneutics at the formal level, there is an abyss between exegesis of Hebrew Scripture and Christian biblical hermeneutics, whose Protestant origins are not only concomitant with philosophical Modernity but also are motivated by the same rejection of ecclesiastical authority. In an all too brief a word, hermeneutics is overtly or covertly anagogically or escathologically oriented. Indeed, Adorno’s presentation of exegesis is “Jewish” or secular. After he establishes the commensurability between philosophy and tradition, Adorno states:

This justifies the move from philosophy to exegesis [*Deutung*], which exalts neither the interpretation nor the symbol into an absolute but seeks the truth where thinking secularizes the irretrievable archetypes of sacred texts.⁷⁸

Adorno links the hostility to tradition to the hostility to rhetoric and to any linguistic expression that is not strictly significative, that is, extrahistorical. If the focus of the discussion of the relation between philosophy and tradition was the concern with emptying of philosophy of mediation by the idols of positivistic science and pure presence, the concern of the discussion of rhetoric is the reduction of all meaning to signification, absolute precision, and, more important, the nominalist reduction of all meaning to signification in the name of demythologization, a reduction

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 55 (Gesammelte Schriften, 6:64). Just as, according to Benjamin, books have afterlives rather than lives where his model for the afterlife is indeed Hebrew scripture.

against which no rhetoric or dialectics can be mustered. Viewed in this light, Adorno's insistence on the historical core of truth is an intervention in the nominalist–realist debate, wrenching it free of Christology, or in its Hegelian form, restitution of conceptual realism. This is a critical intervention against doctrine. As Adorno states, “a genuine critical philosophy against nominalism is not invariant: it changes historically with the function of skepticism. To ascribe any *fundamentum in re* of concepts to the subject is idealism. Nominalism parted company with it only where idealism made objective claims. The concept of a Capitalist society is not a *flatus vocis*.”⁷⁹ At its best, critically or exegetically understood transmissibility is a matter of content rather than form; for, only as transmissible is truth not doctrine, the prohibition against thinking otherwise.

Against the philosophical hostility to rhetoric, which indeed can be usurped for merely practical, persuasive ends, Adorno argues not only that the rhetorical side of philosophy is dialectic but also, and more important, that “it is in the rhetorical quality that culture, society, and tradition animate the thought; a stern hostility to it is leagued with barbarism, in which bourgeois thinking ends.”⁸⁰ Against the tyranny of form mutual to Idealism and nominalism, Adorno proposes a dialectic that attempts to rescue the rhetorical element of philosophy, linking thought and its “object” through language, a link that philosophy either trivializes or disempowers, that is, depoliticizes. As Adorno argues, against popular opinion, or *endoxa*, the rhetorical element in dialectics inclines to content, precisely because content is not closed, that is, it is thoroughly historical and political. As a protest against form, dialectics is a protest against mythology, against the oppressive myth of the ever same, which properly, that is, materially understood, is a taboo against the concrete possibility that there could be a society without beggars.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 49–50. Adorno's use of Roscelyn's rather vulgar description of the relation between name and thing named is clear evidence that he was well versed in the history of the debate from its inception in the eleventh century.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

It is a protest against the promise of happiness in the midst of unhappiness. Against form, Adorno states, "To want substance in cognition is to want a utopia. It is this consciousness of possibility that sticks to the *concrete*, the undisfigured. Utopia is blocked off by possibility, never by immediate reality; that is why it seems abstract in the midst of extant things."⁸¹ Negative dialectics brings into sharp relief the falsity insisted upon by an appeal to the necessity of what is presented as the unchangeable status of immediate reality, its eternal immutability. But, were there a right state of things, were there a society free of beggars, there would be no suffering and hence no need for utopia.

Adorno's writings on music, especially on Mahler and Schoenberg, confront the ban on images at its aesthetic core as well as underscores their Jewish form. Against the ahistorical edifying claims for both absolute music and modern music as expressions of the ever same,⁸² new or avant-garde music deprives the hearers of the familiar, of consolation, repudiating the humanity of which they saw themselves as expressions, albeit in different ways, and thereby making manifest the inhumanity of the insistent claims to music's liberating ability in the midst of oppressive, totalizing institutions. The truth of avant-garde music resides in the absence of meaning, an absence that thereby repudiates the meaning of organized society. The doubled denial has no positive counterpart: in the current historical, political, material context, music is limited to determinate negation.⁸³ That Adorno describes the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 56–57.

⁸² As a critical historical evaluation, neither Adorno nor I wish to extend the claim or evaluation back to Beethoven; on the contrary. Rather, the claim is that concrete, material history has belied the promise of absolute music. Absolute music is the aesthetic face or species of pure presence; hence opposition to it is a form of the ban on images. Modern music, as a successor of ancient and medieval music, is a form of the promise of future happiness. Hence, opposition to it is a form of the prohibition against preparation for the messianic age.

⁸³ I understand determinate negation in a Spinozian, anti-teleological manner. I shall return to the Spinozian origin of "*omnis determinatio est negatio*" in the following chapter.

opposition to Mahler's and Schoenberg's music as expression of antisemitism as early as 1930 is worth noting.⁸⁴

Finally, one of the most vivid, distilled monadic constellations of protest against the persistent and insistent humanist claims of art, an aesthetic expression of negative dialectic, is found in "Toward Understanding Schoenberg." After he notes that Schoenberg's music denies the listener everything to which she has been accustomed, that is, a link to the traditional, to image and consolation, Adorno states:

In an era of music's emancipation it claims to be nothing more than the voice of truth. Without crutches of the familiar, but also without the deception of praise and false positivity. The strength to do this, not illusion, is what is consoling about it. One could say that Schoenberg translated the Old Testament ban on images into music. This alienates us, where tone is concerned.⁸⁵

Art's relation to philosophy as a negative, radical Jewish or secular face (*species*) of negative theology is best summarized by the succinct claims that "[a]rt stand tensed in opposition to the horror of history" and that "it stands opposed to mythology" in *Philosophy of New Music*, the book described by Adorno as a third "detailed excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Adorno, "Mahler Today," in *Essays on Music*, 603–4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 638. In [Chapter 4](#) and [5](#), I return to a discussion of the relation between the modern and new or avant-garde music and the ban on images. In anticipation of the objection to the seeming contradiction between this claim and the insistence on philosophy methexis in tradition, I respond, not at all. Situated quite precisely in relation to tradition, this is especially evident in Mahler's deeply problematic, pastiche-like citations or ridicule of traditional Romantic music. In this sense, Mahler's music is commentary.

⁸⁶ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, Preface, 5.

The Paradox of a Perfect Democracy

From Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise to Marx

Democracy is the truth of monarchy; monarchy is not the truth of democracy. Monarchy is necessarily democracy inconsistent with itself; the monarchical *element* is not an inconsistency in democracy.

It goes without saying that all forms of state have democracy *for* their truth and that they are therefore untrue insofar as they are not democracy.

– “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*”¹

Since the Hebrews did not transfer their right to any other man, but, as in a democracy, they all surrendered their rights on *equal terms*, crying with *one voice* “Whatever God shall speak, we shall do” . . . it follows that this covenant left them all completely equal. . . . They all shared equally in the government of the state. My emphases.

– *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* 17

Preface: An Occlusion in Open Sight

Among Marx’s early Notebooks, which can be found in the fourth volume of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, there is a text entitled *Spinoza Theologische-Politische Traktat von Karl Heinrich Marx. Berlin 1841*. These Notebooks are composed

¹ Marx, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 19–20. My emphasis.

of rearranged and fragmented chapters of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* together with a rather idiosyncratic selection of Spinoza's letters. That this strange work has remained almost entirely hidden (or even occult) may well be a reflection of a deep dis-ease with its form as well as content. Even when this text's existence is recognized, let alone acknowledged, it is, nonetheless, almost entirely ignored, with the exception of a very brief discussion in one chapter of Yirmiyahu Yovel's *The Adventure of Immanence* and volume 1 of *Cahier Spinoza*, published in 1977, which, in addition to Marx's "text," accompanied by a facing French translation, contains six articles, only two of which are devoted to it. Even more striking is the fact that in the Anglo-American philosophical world, these early writings remain almost entirely unknown or unacknowledged.² The differences between the European and Anglo-American academies notwithstanding, studies that address Marx's critique of religion, that is, "On the Jewish Question," "The Holy Family," and "Theses on Feuerbach," fail to ask an obvious question, namely, what, if any, is the relation between Spinoza's radical critique of religion and Marx's critique of ideology and the oppressive institutions whose expression religion/ideology is.

Following selective reflections on the politics of Marx's scholarship, especially in relation to history and politics, in this chapter I first outline the contours of the occluded relation between Spinoza and Marx in the context of the history of Spinoza misappropriations discussed in the previous chapter in order to make intelligible the argument that Marx's rearrangement of Spinoza's TTP is the source of his radical critique of Hegel and the left Hegelians. In fact, Marx's TTP can be viewed as the preface to his radical critique of the latter's claim to be Spinoza's legitimate modern heirs, and the view of their respective critiques of religion and metaphysics as a radicalized fulfillment of Spinoza's materialist project. Against Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer, in particular, whose critiques of religion and materialism remain

² Steve Smith is the exception, although he does not discuss this "text," nor Marx's relation to Spinoza.

strictly metaphysical and/or theological, Marx deploys another Spinoza, whose critique of religion is simultaneously a critique of metaphysics and theology, the concrete overcoming of which renders possible a radical democratic politics.

Hegel's specter hovers over this chapter in several ways, the most concise formulation of which is, borrowing Pierre Machery's title, *Hegel or Spinoza*, where the *or* is exclusive. The concrete way in which Hegel's specter hovers over this chapter quite precisely, even if at times implicitly, takes the form of a contestation between two views of history and politics. In fact, this contestation is already anticipated by the title of this chapter, for the paradox of the perfect democracy exemplified historically and materially in the Hebrew Commonwealth does not enter into Hegel's political philosophy precisely insofar as the Hebrew Commonwealth is excluded from world history, whether it is understood nonmaterially as the unfolding of Spirit in time or concretely as the unfolding of the Idea in space as Nature or God.³ This absence is especially glaring, this silence especially loud, when it is found in a philosopher whose philosophical career began with a reading of Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinoza* in conversation with Schelling and Hölderlin but who then relegates Spinoza's thought to the prehistorical, prephilosophical Orient in one regally ahistorical stroke.⁴

Given Hegel's view of the State, the Hebrew Commonwealth could not on his account qualify as a state, perhaps it was even an antistate, insofar as, despite its elaborate laws, the identity of its laws with religion, its prohibition on graven images, that is, its "rejection" of art, as well as its radically particularistic claims would not even qualify it to belong to the kind of prehistory to which the Orient is consigned. In the light of Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, especially the astounding silence about the centrality of political philosophy to medieval Islamic

³ Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 75. As indicated in the previous chapter, a substantive engagement with the silence of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, as well as *Philosophy of History*, about Spinoza's TTP and TP is as much a desideratum as it is beyond the scope of this book.

⁴ See the discussion of Hegel in [Chapter 1](#).

and Jewish philosophy as well as that about Spinoza's political writings, the tortuous confining of Maimonides' critique of the Mutakallimun to metaphysics and the metaphysical reading of the *Ethics* is clearly a symptom of this expulsion from history and politics. In fact, it is no exaggeration to claim that such an expulsion is a prerequisite for the emergence of both the single philosophical tradition and the "Jewish Question."

Against Hegel, I seek to return Spinoza's political philosophy to history, a counterhistory understood materially and concretely, beginning with Spinoza's uncanny, paradoxical claim in the TTP that in the Hebrew Commonwealth the perfect theocracy was a perfect democracy both with respect to freedom and with respect to equality. It is this paradox, I argue, that is the model for Marx's political philosophy precisely because it provides the blueprint to a freedom from *human* rule that is concurrent with a radical economic equality.

The underlying premise of this chapter is that Marx's attentive engagement with Spinoza, his reading of Spinoza's political writings as relevant to current debates, not only motivates his critique of Hegel and the left Hegelians but also constitutes the unifying thread of his thought, beginning with the critique of religion, through the critique of ideology, to the critique of political economy.

Part I

a. An Excursus with Althusser

It is common practice to divide Marx's early and late writings to an extent such that the later writings are viewed as a *radical*, properly speaking, Marxist, departure from the earlier ones, which are then presented as left Hegelian. This distinction is further characterized as a *radical* transition from a critique of religion and ideology to a critique of political economy. The underlying implicit and often explicit assumptions here are (1) that there are two, perhaps even three critiques that are really distinct and (2) that Marx (both young and old) believed that the critique

of religion and/or ideology could indeed result in an overcoming of ideology so that the proletariat could become self-conscious of alienation prior to, and independently of, their economic emancipation. Were this the case, from a Marxist (rather than Marxian) perspective, the study of the early works is a quaint academic pursuit, devoid of practical, that is, revolutionary possibilities. Given the prevalence of this view, I cannot overemphasize the fact that a central premise of this book and one of its primary motivations is the conviction that this form of discontinuity is both ahistorical and undialectical, provided that by dialectics we understand materialist, nonteleological dialectics. Indeed, there is a difference between the idiom and emphasis of the early and later works, but this difference does not amount to a radical break; on the contrary, it is a mark of a concrete, materialist dialectics.

Now, it is not my intention here (or elsewhere) to enter the fray of the disputes which began as a polemics between the orthodox Marxist-Leninists and “revisionist” social democrats, nor its successors to date. Nonetheless, this dispute and its various destinies disclose a significant problem in post-Marxian scholarship, namely, that, with few exceptions, it is thoroughly political or rather polemical. As Louis Althusser soberly noted even as he intervened in the dispute, “first of all, any discussion of Marx’s Early Works is a political discussion.”⁵ And while Althusser enters the fray in order to reach a conclusion at the very end that “Marxism is not a Humanism,” humanism being ideology, which ideology denies its ideological nature, with which I wholeheartedly agree, I disagree with Althusser’s belief that there can be a radical epistemological break between ideology and science, precisely because the concrete human subject, which is Spinoza’s, Marx’s, Althusser’s, and my concern, be she scientist or a member of the working classes, is subject to economic, political, and historical forces of which she is not the author, and which she

⁵ Althusser, *For Marx*, 51.

cannot autonomously overcome.⁶ More precisely, and as will become evident, what is in question is history and politics. For the departure from Hegel, the turning of Hegel upside down and beyond does not ipso facto depart from ideology. I shall return to the question of history and ideology in relation to Althusser's thought in the conclusion to this chapter, precisely because the belief that there can be a nonideological politics is an ahistorical philosophical conceit, a surprising blind spot, so to speak, in the thought of a materialist philosopher.

b. Revisiting Historical Materialism: Dialectics before Hegel, or The Concept "Dog" Does Not Bark

The first man to have posed the problem of *reading*, and in consequence, of *writing*, was Spinoza, and he was also the first man in the world to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate. With him, for the first time ever, a man linked together in this way the essence of reading and the essence of history in a theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true.⁷

Just as Marx's thought has generated a rich variety of zealous disciples, so has Spinoza's, so that in any attempt to retrieve either thinker from polemical battles, one is compelled first to clear some of the most common, often violent misappropriations that their respective works have generated. In fact, it is no exaggeration to claim that the more radical the thinker, the more critical of the philosophy current at the time, the more violent and varied the destiny of their books, especially when a significant aspect of their works is political. From this perspective it is not surprising that neither Descartes nor Leibniz, neither Schelling nor Kant, has generated the kind of agonistic camps

⁶ This is too hasty and hence presents a somewhat misleading account of Althusser's epistemology. It serves here to succinctly summarize a general philosophical conceit that the philosopher, or rather scientist, is beyond ideology. In fact, it is precisely with respect to the difference between ideology aware of itself as ideology or of what cannot be outside ideology and one that is not that Althusser claims that "to be a Spinozist or a Marxist is exactly the same thing." Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 164.

⁷ Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, 16–17.

that have Spinoza, Hegel, and Marx.⁸ Since the concern of this chapter is to uncover Spinoza's influence on Marx's political philosophy, since both thinkers have been violently appropriated, or effectively buried by their different disciples in the service of diverse ideological agenda, and since these appropriations constitute thick occlusions, at the outset I am compelled to frame this chapter with three preliminary provisos, which will be supplemented at crucial moments of the discussion.

First, if a historical materialist dialectic is to be critical, it must simultaneously be a reflection of concrete material institutions and practices and of the ideology or forms of consciousness to which they give rise. For both Marx and Spinoza, this is as true of the philosophers' lofty ideas/ideals as it is of the "vulgar masses." Briefly and explicitly stated, throughout his writings, Marx's dialectical articulations of the relations between specific oppressive material conditions, be they religious, political, or economic, and the alienated forms of consciousness reflecting them can, without exaggeration, be said to be nothing other than the nineteenth-century expression of Spinoza's repeated claim in the *Ethics* that "mind is nothing but an idea of body," stated explicitly in historical terms. Now, in anticipation of an objection, I want to state categorically what I have argued at length elsewhere, namely, that the *Ethics* is not a metaphysical text, with a brief physical digression; rather, as I argued in [Chapter 1](#), it is an ethics/politics, heir to a materialist Aristotelian tradition, in which tradition the *physis* of the human *psyche*, whose motion and action originate in appetition or desire, lives in the *polis*, for only gods and beasts live outside the city.⁹

⁸ It is noteworthy that Kant's political writings as well as polemics are generally ignored by Kant scholars.

⁹ For further discussions of an other Materialist, Aristotelian tradition in relation to Spinoza, see Dobbs-Weinstein, "Whose History?" and "Thinking Desire." Properly understood, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is a metaphysics only in "name" and "place," having been placed after the *Physics*. Insofar as Aristotle explicitly states that "being can be said in many ways," the study of "being qua being" is not a unifying metaphysics (as ontology) on the contrary, such unification would violate Aristotle's prohibition against metabasis. See [Chapter 1](#) and Dobbs-Weinstein, "Aristotle on the Natural Dwelling of Intellect."

Consequently and second, Spinoza's TTP and TP are thoroughly historical, pace Hegel and others, in at least two ways, provided that by history we do not mean a philosophy of history nor any other future-oriented historical narrative, nor for that matter does it require an account of time, a metaphysical "being" par excellence for Spinoza.¹⁰ Thus, in exploring the theological-political origin of the state, the TTP first engages the current dogmata that sustain and legitimize oppressive institutions and then turns to the historical origin of the nation-state in the Hebrew Commonwealth as well as to its transformation or deformation from an absolute democracy, through aristocracy, to monarchy (as distinct from theocracy). Furthermore, the TP, as a materialist dialectical inquiry, begins from concrete, existing political forms of government rather than positing abstract, let alone ideal ones, in order to explore the democratic possibilities that they may harbor. That is why, inter alia, Spinoza explores at length two different forms of aristocracy whose material possibility is found in concrete recent Dutch history.

Third, insofar as Spinoza's TTP and TP were written in mercantilist Holland, and insofar as he was no ogre, although he was certainly avant-garde, perhaps still is, the masses whom he was the first to theorize carefully¹¹ could not possibly be Marx's proletariat, just as Marx's proletariat can no longer be said to exist now (if it ever did *exist*, let alone self-consciously), and hence do not appear in the thought of other historical materialists committed to demystification, such as Horkheimer and

¹⁰ Thus, Hegel's claim that he is Spinoza plus time (and one may add will) is a violent destruction of Spinoza. Still, to be fair to Hegel, world history for him is not future oriented but rather it is a form of the present's concern with the past. Nonetheless, the Philosophy of History is the unfolding of Spirit in Time as the striving for the realization of its freedom, whereas matter's striving for unity is a striving for the ideal in which it is overcome as matter. Hegel's view of matter is strikingly atomistic rather than Spinozist.

¹¹ Balibar, a careful reader of Spinoza and Marx, explores and emphasizes this in *Spinoza and Politics*.

Adorno, for which they are criticized as defectors from Marxism in the grandiose fashion of all ahistorical dogmatic criticism.¹²

c. Homage to a Dead Dog¹³– The Three Notebooks

It is no exaggeration to claim that the same methodological, or more precisely, if awkwardly, named epistemico-methodological, principle constitutes the continuity of Spinoza's and Marx's works as well as motivates their rigorously materialist dialectic, namely, "*omnis determinatio est negatio*," whether it is explicitly expressed in these terms or in less obvious but equally rigorous ones, for example, all the definitions in Spinoza's *Ethics*; for definitions are quite precisely determinations.¹⁴ I want to further claim that it is indeed this principle that Hegel repeats, deploys, and explicitly refers back to Spinoza, even though, and as, he deliberately misinterprets it in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*,¹⁵ and that Marx appropriates against Hegel and the left Hegelians in a manner more subtle and truer to Spinoza than his proclaimed followers. This is also the principle that constitutes the continuity between Marx's critique of religion and his critique

¹² See "Editor's Afterwords," in Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, esp. 243–47. I shall return to these accusations in the following chapters.

¹³ In the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, Marx summarily dismisses Hegel's and Spinoza's critics, saying, "But, just as I was working at the first volume of 'Das Kapital' it was the good pleasure of peevish, arrogant, mediocre, *epigono*i, who now talk large in cultured Germany to treat Hegel in the same way as the brave Moses Mendelssohn in Lessing's time treated Spinoza, i.e., as a 'dead dog.' I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker" (19–20). In so doing, Marx clearly also pays tribute to Spinoza and Hegel as philosophical beacons.

¹⁴ Cf. Spinoza *TdIE* #94ff, as well as Letter 9 to Simon de Vries.

¹⁵ Hegel's misrepresentation depends upon deploying this principle merely as a methodological principle. Hence, his claim that its contradiction, "*omnis negatio est determinatio*," will present the particular purportedly absent in Spinoza. Indeed, there is no particular in Spinoza in a Hegelian sense since there is no universal except as beings of the imagination or reason. Or, differently stated with humor, the particular dog does not bark any more than does the universal, it does not become concrete and real by a rational determination.

of political economy. Now, although this claim in an embryonic form has been acknowledged several times and is even found in Robert Tucker in a note on the *Grundrisse*, in the *Marx-Engels Reader*,¹⁶ it has remained merely that, and was pursued only briefly in one essay in the *Cahiers Spinoza* by Maximilian Rubel, entitled “Marx à la rencontre de Spinoza.”¹⁷ More important, left to this benign neglect, and owing to it, the acknowledgment of the provenance of this principle also covers over the fact that it is ubiquitous in Spinoza’s writings beginning with the TdIE and accounts for the epistemic status of the definitions first in the exposition of *Descartes Principles* but more important in the *Ethics*. It is key to the difference between Cartesian analytic, that is, tautological definitions, and Spinoza’s Euclidian, that is, generative ones,¹⁸ which were clearly of great interest to Marx, as is evident by his selections of the correspondence with Simon de Vries on definitions, that is, determinations. It is from this perspective that we may be able to shed some light on the relation between what at first glance may appear unrelated, not only between the “reconstructed” TTP and the appended letters, but also among the letters, as well as accounts for the selection of both passages and letters.

Now, it is not my intention here to either repeat or take issue at great length with Alexandre Matheron’s painstaking study of the first *Cahier* on the TTP, which carefully compares Spinoza’s and Marx’s TTP texts. Taking issue with it in any way, which I will do briefly, feels petty in comparison to Matheron’s careful scholarship both here and elsewhere. I shall therefore focus only on one set of claims and the conclusion drawn from them in Matheron’s discussion of the first chapter of Marx’s TTP on “miracles.” While I share Matheron’s surprise about the absence of reference to Spinoza’s *Ethics*, especially to Appendix 1, in the

¹⁶ Marx, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 228n8.

¹⁷ See, respectively, *ibid.*, 228n, in which Tucker also immediately limits its appearance in Spinoza to a letter to Jelles, and thus also minimizes its centrality in his thought, and Rubel, “Marx à la rencontre de Spinoza,” 7–28.

¹⁸ See Meyer’s preface to the PP (*Complete Works*, 227), CM, and Letter 9 to de Vries.

discussion of miracles and other prejudices in the Notebooks, as well as at the glaring absence of the Preface of the TTP, I disagree with his conclusion that Marx had no interest in the genesis of illusion in self-interest, a purported disinterest which is also, according to Matheron, evident in Marx's disinterest in the Jewish projection of election, the form of worship consequent upon it, let alone his relation to "others." First, Marx's selection of Letter 17 to Peter Balling would be inexplicable, at best mere curiosity, were it not for the fact that it concerns the relation between illusion, imagination, and confused awareness of self-interest. Second, and more important, at the core of Marx's critique of religion and polemic with theologians is the origin of false consciousness, which false consciousness is nothing other than mistaken or misplaced self-interest. It is important to note, even if prematurely, that the question of self-consciousness, true as well as false, is simultaneously a question of religious and class identification, that is, of politics and economics.

Based upon Spinoza's logical syntax, connecting disparate fragments by terms such as *scilicet*, *itaque*, *quia*, Matheron argues that Marx's elimination of the problem of self-interest as well as Jewish election makes possible a logical conclusion about human stupidity *in general*, a conclusion that, precisely owing to its *general form*, "effaces all aspects of Spinoza's thought."¹⁹ This is a remarkable claim. Now, admittedly, the syntax of Marx's TTP, especially Marx's use of conjunctions to connect different fragments, is very clever. But, one may as easily argue that it proceeds *more geometrico* as *more logico*. In fact, were it the case that Marx's method here was logical, it would resemble a Cartesian or Hegelian rather than a Spinozist form of argumentation. This claim about Marx's method cannot be supported for at least two reasons, one material, the other philosophical. First, the selection of the correspondence with de Vries as well as Meyer makes evident that Marx's interest in Spinoza's method is not incidental and in fact provides him with the tools for a materialist dialectical critique. And, insofar as Matheron emphasizes

¹⁹ Matheron, "Le Traité Théologico-Politique," 162.

the advantage of this methodo-logical procedure and locates its effects in the *generality* of the conclusion, even if by logic he means dialectics, it is certainly not a materialist, let alone historical, dialectic but rather an abstract Hegelian one. Second, philosophically, the problem of Jewish election, let alone the Jewish question, remained a focus of Marx's critique not only of religion but also, and more important, of the modern state, the Christian nature of which state he emphasizes and critiques in his exchange with Bauer. Furthermore, Jewish specificity is not absent from the chapter on miracles. Further on in the chapter (Spinoza and) Marx refers to "Jews and others like them,"²⁰ a likeness constituted by shared ignorance and the illusion that they were God's beloved elect.²¹ Finally, it is precisely the specificity of the Hebrew Commonwealth that is of central importance to Marx in several subsequent chapters, for it is that concrete, material, historical singular existence that makes manifest the paradox of the perfect democracy, a paradox whose dialectical implications were of great significance to Marx.

Before I turn to the Hebrew Commonwealth in Spinoza and Marx, I wish to provide a brief justification of my claim that the principle "*omnis determination est negatio*" underlies the peculiar unity of the selections of fragments and letters in the Notebooks and hazard a preliminary explanation of the absence of reference to the *Ethics*. Taken materially and historically (and following Aristotle and his materialist Jewish heirs), the principle would demand that any dialectical inquiry will begin from the most important and prevalent, contemporaneous philosophical opinions precisely because they are the theoretical expressions or forms of consciousness reflecting existing, oppressive institutions, religious, legal, economic. Just as Cartesian philosophy and Calvinist as well as Mennonite theology are expressions of the economic and political institutions of seventeenth-century Holland, so also Hegelian philosophy and Catholic and Lutheran

²⁰ Marx, "Le Traité Théologico-Politique," 36 [15].

²¹ The numerous references to the prophets are also direct references to the prophets of Hebrew scripture, whose form of speech is "*ad captum vulgi*."

theology are the expressions of nineteenth-century German institutions. That is why Spinoza's interlocutors are Cartesians, Calvinist and Mennonite scientists, philosophers and theologians, and Marx's are Hegelian, Christian theologians and metaphysicians. And here, ironically, Marx's concern may appear to be narrower and more academic than Spinoza's, whose concern with prejudice is extended to the vulgar as well as to theologians and metaphysicians, precisely because the affective unification of the masses as masses, their constitution by the same passions, especially the hope and fear generated by religious authorities and dogmatic theologians, turn them into the most extensive force.²² Whereas the narrower focus of the Notebooks may partly account for the strange absence of the Appendix to *Ethics* I as well as of the Preface to the TTP, as will become evident, Spinoza's conception of the masses will play an important role in Marx's theorizing of the proletariat in the "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*."

Before I turn to the discussion of the Hebrew Commonwealth, and based on the assumption that most readers have not encountered this strange "text," I owe the reader a brief description of the letters. The two Notebooks of selected letters contain twenty-five letters, of which fifteen are by Spinoza and ten are addressed to him. The bulk of both kinds is constituted by correspondence with Henry Oldenberg spanning from 1661 to 1676. Of the remaining letters, two are addressed to Simon de Vries, one received from him, and one each is addressed to Ludwig Meyer, Peter Balling, William Von Blyenbergh, and Alfred Burgh. Many of the letters to Oldenberg, those to de Vries, and that to Meyer focus on scientific and methodological questions, concerning both content and form, and are often critical of prevailing opinions. Other letters to Oldenberg and the letters to von Blyenbergh and Burgh concern tensions and contradictions between

²² Whereas the psychology of the affects, especially primary political ones, fear and hope, is central to Spinoza's political philosophy, it appears to be of little interest to Marx, with the exception of forms of consciousness as they constitute a class. Although this is a central problem in thinking the making of the proletariat in Marx, it is clearly beyond the confines of this chapter.

Spinoza's position on god, nature, good, bad, providence, in short, questions concerning which there is disagreement between Spinoza's philosophy, or more precisely reason and scripture. The letter to Balling focuses on a dream and concerns the relation between the imagination, the primary affects, and illusion. Strangely, the letters to Von Blyenbergh and Burgh, respectively, bookend the collection. In other words, the problem of religion, its imminent hostility to philosophy, provides the continuity between Marx's rearranged TTP and the letters. Moreover, insofar as most of the questions and objections in the letters originate in Spinoza's "translation" of Descartes's *Principles*, which transforms Cartesian metaphysics and ontotheology, a transformation that will later determine both the methodology and content of the *Ethics*, the letters can be said to "replace" the *Ethics* in this specific context. That the letters end with a lengthy, harshly worded criticism of Burgh and the Roman Catholic Church is rather telling: the determinate power of the Church is the material historical negation of philosophy, and vice versa.²³

What is astonishing about both Spinoza and Marx and is rarely remarked upon is the fact that both undertook radical and rigorous critiques of religion and/or metaphysics which were often addressed to theologians and metaphysicians. That in many of these contexts neither Spinoza nor Marx distinguishes between theology and metaphysics is not surprising, especially since, in the context of a theologico-political critique, the place of religion in the commonwealth is of the utmost importance, precisely because, materially and historically understood, it is not *merely* a passive expression of alienated consciousness but also and more important a material political force.²⁴ Moreover, for both Spinoza and Marx, the critiques seek to liberate politics from religion by appeal both to critical theologians and,

²³ One needs only recall the condemnation of 1272 and 1277, the absolute prohibition (on fear of one's life) against the materialist Aristotelian tradition culminating with Ibn-Rushd (Averroes) to make amply manifest the concrete historical force of the Roman Catholic Church. That these are potentially affective to Spinoza, the Marrano Jew, should be no surprise.

²⁴ Cf. Hegel's *Philosophy of History*.

in Spinoza's case, to open-minded Christian politicians. Oldenberg, Meyer, and de Vries are to Spinoza what Ruge, Bauer, and Feuerbach are to Marx.

Now, I have argued at length elsewhere that Spinoza did not believe that the critique of religion can eliminate the need for religion, precisely because it is a human institution arising out of very powerful affects, and I will not repeat the argument here.²⁵ In the light of the prevalent scholarship on Marx, exemplified by the separation between the young and old Marx, where the difference between the two is often presented as a transition from a critique of religion/ideology to a critique of political economy, in order to justify my emphatic insistence on the continuous centrality of the critique of religion, I clearly must address the widespread conviction that Marx believed that the radical critique of religion will result in its overcoming. I will postpone this discussion to the end of the analyses of the "Jewish Question."

Part II

a. *The Commonwealth*

But Nature? Surely, she creates individuals, not nations, which are distinguished [into nations] only through a diversity of languages, of laws, and of accepted customs; and only the last two, namely, laws and customs, can be the origin of the singular character [*ingenium*], mode of life [*conditionem*], and prejudices [*praejudicia*] of any singular nation whatsoever.²⁶

As alluded to in my critical engagement with Matheron, the question of the uniqueness of the Hebrew Commonwealth, in its particularity, is inseparable, for Marx, from the "Jewish Question" as it is manifest in its historical specificity, that is, in its specifically German, Christian form. Spinoza was the first thinker to theorize the modern state, the purportedly secular state, freed not only from the oppressive authority of the Roman Catholic,

²⁵ In addition to Dobbs-Weinstein, "Whose History?," see also Dobbs-Weinstein, "Power of Prejudice."

²⁶ Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* 17, 207. My emphasis.

universal church and the feudal institutions concomitant with it but also from Christianity. And it is in this state that the “Jewish Question” is transformed from a “religious” to a political, legal, and economic question precisely through the occlusion of its origins as religious and of its history as persecution.²⁷ This is why the critical engagement with Bauer immediately succeeded the reconstructed TTP and was immediately followed by the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*.

Insofar as Spinoza has been understood even by some of his most attentive readers as a metaphysician, before proceeding, I must provide a gloss to a few fundamental terms deployed in the TTP which are mistranslated and misunderstood in direct proportion as they are read from the perspective which they seek to undermine. (1) The Latin term *status naturalis*, “natural state,” is translated as if it were identical to *status naturae*, “state of nature.” However, insofar as Spinoza dismisses as absurd all those who understand human association, let alone freedom, as freedom from nature, all those who view the human as a dominion within a dominion, that is, all those who understand the state of society to be an overcoming of a state of nature, this little mistranslation renders Spinoza’s critique literally incoherent. In contrast, for Spinoza, the natural state is coextensive with the civil state; properly understood, they are two aspects of the same. Hence, however we interpret the term *pactum*, the term alternatively translated by “covenant” and “contract,” it cannot possibly be understood as the abstract “social contract” of political philosophy from the seventeenth century on. Finally, for the present purpose, the most telling and violent mistranslation is that of the Latin term *salus*.²⁸ Rather than repeat my diatribe against the translation of this term, I shall let Curley’s glossary-index speak for itself. “Classically, *salus* means *health, welfare, safety*. But (except in the phrase *salus publica*) Spinoza

²⁷ Insofar as scripture remains an extensive force in Hobbes’s commonwealth, even if its interpretative authority now rests with the sovereign, it is a secular Modern state in name only, just as Hegel’s and Bauer’s Germany is, according to Marx.

²⁸ See Dobbs-Weinstein, “Power of Prejudice.”

seems always to use it in the sense it acquired in the Christian tradition.”²⁹ Given that one of the purposes of the state is safety/security, that is, some form of *salus*, the other being freedom, given that Spinoza radically dissociates religious and political concerns, and given that he does not admit anything extranatural, even were individual *salus* distinct from *salus publica*, it cannot be *extra publica*, since to the same extent that there exists nothing extranatural, so also there exists nothing extrapolitical.

Hence, Spinoza’s critical analysis of the Hebrew state, an analysis that also provides a genealogy of the transformation of ethics/politics into religion/metaphysics or, more precisely, the usurpation of the former by the latter, exposes the prejudice specific to the abstract religious, metaphysical, or onto-theological view of the Jew, who embodies specific, essential national characteristics by nature, whether it is the stubborn Jew specifically named in the TTP or, by extension, Kant’s nation of merchant and cheaters, or the suffering servant, the carnal lover of money, etc. In the theological/metaphysical fiction of the material mode of existence of the generic Jew, Jewish election becomes an unredeemed and unredeemable existence, one incapable and unworthy of freedom. By detaching the history of the Hebrew state from the dominant theological narrative or the history of salvation, Spinoza simultaneously makes evident both the falseness of accounts that “explain” differences among nations as natural manifestations of purportedly historical necessity and their insidious political consequences. His emphatic claim that nature creates individuals, not nations, is in fact a response to the Christo-Platonic view of the Jew in both its religious and so-called secular garb.

Responding to the question why, despite its original unity, a unity constituted by Mosaic law, the Hebrew state suffered the vicissitudes that it did or “why the Hebrews forsook the Law, and why they were so many times conquered, and why it came about that their state was utterly destroyed,” Spinoza presents

²⁹ Spinoza, *Collected Work*, Glossary-Index E, 654.

the commonly held view/prejudice that suggests that the fate of the Hebrew state “resulted from the stubbornness of the race.”³⁰ Explaining the destruction of the state to be a consequence of a disobedience originating in the nature of the Jews qua Jews, the suggestion indicates that the fate of the Jew is an expression of divine justice. In response, Spinoza summarily dismisses this suggestion as childish, that is, unworthy of *philosophical* consideration. For the naturalistic or metaphysical form of this suggestion, that is, the reference to the Hebrew community as a *genus*, turns nature upside down, reifying nature (and simultaneously personifying God-Nature) and thereby establishing a real and radical distinction between Nature and the specific historical conditions and conventions in which it is expressed.³¹ But, were this the case, religion/politics would constitute a dominion within a dominion, the possibility of which Spinoza emphatically and repeatedly denies. Dismissing this suggestion as foolish, in lieu of a response, Spinoza asks, “For, why was this nation more stubborn than others?”³²

God as Nature does not elect nor redeem a people, nor for that matter does it distinguish between human and other natural individuals; God as elected is the concrete historical response to fear and hope, the primary passions which are the origin of both politics and religion.³³ The more an individual understands God as Nature, the less she is a passive subject of hope and fear, and the freer she is. But, to the same extent that she is free, and may be said “to have a portion in the world to come” (*Mishnah*), or immortality (*Ethics* 5), *were it the case that the natural state was ever really distinct from the civil one*, to that extent would she

³⁰ Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* 17, 207 [93]: “*id evenisse ex gentis contumancia*,” Gebhardt.

³¹ Although the puerile, vulgar view of divinity implied by this suggestion is not treated in this chapter, it is important to note that it is ridiculed in E1Appendix, as well as earlier chapters of the TTP. This presentation of divinity and divine justice is also at radical odds with the very limited role that Spinoza concedes to religion in the TTP, namely, the promoting of peace and piety.

³² Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* 17, 207.

³³ See Appendix *Ethics* 1.

“overcome” or repress the fears and concomitant prejudices that define her “national,” that is, religious, belonging.³⁴ And, were such an overcoming or transcendence of national belonging really possible, so would it be possible for the individual to overcome her nation’s law, customs, and prejudices even if she does not transgress them; that is, she will become morally “autonomous” by becoming “heteronomous” to her nation’s laws and customs and, thereby, overcome history and “jewishness.” But this is precisely what Spinoza denies, pace Stoic readings of the *Ethics*.³⁵ For not only does reason not have power over the primary passions, but also, were it not for the power of the primary passions, the passions necessary for self-preservation, there would be no need for religion or politics, that is, there would be nothing but the natural state. The only difference acknowledged by Spinoza between the natural and civil state is that in the former, individual fears arise from indefinitely many individual circumstances and hence differ, whereas in the latter, “all men fear the same things, and all have the same ground for security, the same way of life,”³⁶ as determined by laws and customs. Understood in this way, the natural/civil state,³⁷ were it to come into being, would be the overcoming of religion and of the civil (covertly religious) nation-state. Indeed, for Spinoza, the fundamental difference

³⁴ A discussion of the psychology of the affects is clearly beyond the scope of this chapter. For the purpose of the present discussion, suffice it to underscore the fact that fear and hope are the primary passions necessary for self-preservation and, in the case of hope, also flourishing. For a longer discussion of the centrality of fear and hope in Spinoza’s critique of religion and politics, see Dobbs-Weinstein, “Whose History?”

³⁵ Cf. *Ethics* 5 Preface, 595. “Nevertheless, the Stoics thought that they [the affects] depend entirely on our will, and that we can command them absolutely. But experience cries out against this.”

³⁶ Spinoza, *Political Treatise* 3, 49.

³⁷ Awkward as the term “natural/civil state” may appear, I use it deliberately to draw a distinction between a form of the state that is secular in form only as were all European states in the seventeenth century and arguably still are all nation-states. This distinction is also key to understanding Marx’s “On the Jewish Question.” Moreover, I wish to recall my gloss on the terms *status naturalis* and *status civilis*, as well as *pactum*. An understanding of Spinoza’s deployment of these terms against the grain is necessary for investigating his influence on Marx.

between religion and politics is that concretely, that is, historically, understood, to the same extent that religion seeks to legislate "true" and false" beliefs, as distinct from permissible and impermissible actions, to that extent has it been and continues to be the source of the political discord that undermines the possibility of sovereignty and hence the concrete liberty necessary for the security and "commonwealth" (*salus publica*) that are the *raison d'être* of politics or the commonwealth, let alone the freedom at which it aims.³⁸ Differently stated, it is Spinoza's claim that religion as an institution always seeks to legislate belief rather than action. For the control of belief is ipso facto also the control of action. Properly understood, then, the relation between religion and the natural/civil state is thoroughly antagonistic; whereas the *raison d'être* of religion is obedience, that of the natural/civil state is freedom.³⁹ And as Spinoza points out, "nobody knows by nature that he has any duty to obey God."⁴⁰ Stating that the natural state "is prior to religion in nature and time," echoing Maimonides (and al-Farabi),⁴¹ Spinoza repeatedly emphasizes that prior to religion and law, there is no sin, wrong, or duty.⁴² That is, obedience and disobedience arise from human convention or projections of what is and is not beneficial to self-preservation, let alone (*salus*) health and commonwealth (*salus publica*).

³⁸ Although the critique of religion in the TTP, which seeks to delegitimize theological authority and thereby the political role of religion in the state, is generally read only or predominantly – and not without justification – to aim at the freedom of thought, in light of its insistence on the conventional nature of normative categories, I am convinced that "the freedom of thought" is, for Spinoza, covertly (or carefully read, overtly) freedom of action. More explicitly stated, freedom of thought and freedom of action are separable only if freedom is understood immaterially, dualistically, and ahistorically.

³⁹ I do not agree with Balibar's claim that Spinoza "pessimistically" modifies his view of the purpose of the state in the TP. For my engagement with Balibar's rich discussion of Spinoza's politics, see "Whose History."

⁴⁰ Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* 16, 188.

⁴¹ Moses Maimonides, *Guide I* 71, 177.

⁴² Although Spinoza deploys this distinction for concrete, historical reasons that are, at best and quite literally, alien to Maimonides or even appear to contradict Maimonides' a-democratic conception of sovereignty, it is still both attentive to and re-members Maimonides' insistence that good and bad are conventional rather than natural or rational categories.

Properly understood, Spinoza's radical critique of religion and demand for a stringent restriction of religion in the state, its radical separation from power, never assume that the psychological need for religion can ever be overcome. On the contrary, to overcome the need for religion would amount to an overcoming of hope and fear, that is, nature, which, for Spinoza, is literally absurd, *atopos*, or has no place. Instead, by instituting customs and formulating laws, the "secular" state redirects the affects, especially fear and hope. Thus understood, the "secular" civil state is never the overcoming of religion but its usurpation.⁴³

b. *The Hebrew Commonwealth*

Since the Hebrews did not transfer their right to any other man, but, *as in a democracy*, they all surrendered their rights on *equal terms*, crying with *one voice* "Whatever God shall speak, we shall do" . . . it follows that this covenant left them all completely equal. . . . They all shared equally in the government of the state.⁴⁴

What is most remarkable about Spinoza's genealogy of the original Hebrew Commonwealth, of its uniqueness and reasons for its stability and longevity, is his argument that the God of the Hebrew Commonwealth was democratically elected by the people. Mosaic law is the divine law of the people. "For it was through this very belief that God's power alone could *save* them that they transferred to God all their natural power of *self preservation*."⁴⁵ In short, for Spinoza, the first and only true, that

⁴³ I avoid the language of sublation so as to avoid the Hegelian interpretation as an advance, which it may or may not be. I avoid the language of repression because some forms of repression are salutary for sociality, whereas others are not.

⁴⁴ Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* 17, 196. My emphasis.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* My emphases. "Nam hoc ipso, se sola Dei potentia servari posse crediderunt, omnem suam naturalem potentiam se conservandi, quam ex se habere antea forte putaverant, in Deum transtulerunt, & consequenter omnem suum jus" (Gebhard, 192). A discussion of the fear(s) that led to the election of God, i.e., the projection of mythic power beyond nature, is clearly beyond the scope of this chapter. In this context, especially anticipating Marx, suffice it to note that human nature, for Spinoza, is an expression of nature which, when understood naturally, i.e., as devoid of laws, is always a threat to self-preservation. See TTP 16.

is, legitimate, theocracy was also the most comprehensive democracy. It is in this state, where there was no difference between civil law and religion, that piety equaled justice, impiety injustice, which injustice was an infraction against all other citizens, and hence deprived the offender of her citizenship, that is, membership in the community. As an exemplary democracy, where there is no mediator between equal citizens and the elected God, the original Hebrew Commonwealth is politically originary in a more important way, namely, "it seems the most natural form of the state, approaching most clearly to that freedom which nature grants to every man."⁴⁶ This is also the moment where electing and being elected are identical. To transgress the law at this moment entails that there is no other law. She who transgresses the covenant which is her own does not *yet* belong to an other community; she is not a member of the righteous of the nations or some prepolitical moral community, nor does she inhabit a solitary natural place, because to be bound by law is to be bound to the laws of this nation whose existence was brought into being by her own election.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* 16, 185.

⁴⁷ It must be noted that Spinoza cites one text of Maimonides' discussion of "election" in relation to the righteous of the nations, *Hilkhot Melakhim* (Laws of Kings) 8, Law 11. He does so, however, in order to criticize what he chooses to present as Maimonides' explanation for following the law, including the Noahite law. See *Theological Political Treatise* 5, 70. A discussion of Spinoza's straw-man deployment of Maimonidean positions is beyond the scope of this book. Here suffice it to point out that Spinoza's misrepresentation of Maimonides' position is very clever: on one hand, it is true that Maimonides does not consider the Noahite laws to be rational, because laws are conventional rather than rational. It is not true, however, that Maimonides argues for following them on the basis of divine authority, since the Noahite laws are pre-Mosaic or extra-Mosaic; rather than being "divine," they are the generally accepted opinions shared by all political communities. On the other hand, the misrepresentation conceals Spinoza's own position about normative categories. As Spinoza states earlier in the same chapter, "if men were so constituted by nature to desire nothing but what is prescribed by true reason, society would stand in no need of any laws." *Theological Political Treatise* 5, 64. One possible reason for this ruse is that, in the context of biblical interpretation, Spinoza seeks to deprive Maimonides of all philosophical authority.

It cannot be overemphasized that, for Spinoza, especially when we seek to understand his influence on Marx, the original/originary covenant is not based upon reason; originating, as it does, out of fear, its primary motivation for the alienation of one's power is self-preservation as it is perceived individually by the fool, the mad, and the sane alike.⁴⁸ For, even when some of the individuals who seek self-preservation may do so on the basis of understanding, nonetheless, what is understood is what is to be feared. More precisely, for Spinoza, properly understood, a true and enduring democracy cannot be based upon reason but only upon what is common to all natural, living entities, that is, the a-rational desire for self-preservation and flourishing. For even were it the case that rational deliberation is the domain of the few – the conceit of many philosophers who persist in the illusion of reason's power over the primary affects – nonetheless, fear is common to all living entities, qua living, including those capable of rational deliberation. Once again, for Spinoza, reason has no power over the affects, nor can it effect democracy; for reason is, at best, the mediation of the few about what ought to be feared by all members of a commonwealth, that is, reason may, at best, make possible the substitution of a single, common fearful or hopeful image for indefinitely many individual ones.⁴⁹ I want to suggest that this is, in fact, what Marx has in mind when he argues with respect to the unification of the proletariat that “a class must be formed,” to which I shall turn at the end of the chapter.

Before proceeding to a brief consideration of Spinoza's impact on Marx's critique of religion and the state, two central aspects of Spinoza's political philosophy must be reconsidered in relation to Marx. First, I cannot overemphasize the centrality of the psychology of the affects to Spinoza's elaboration of democracy

⁴⁸ Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* 16, 179–80.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.* It cannot be overemphasized that Spinoza's endorsement of democracy is radically at odds with contemporary liberal democratic theories. A discussion of this difference is also clearly beyond the scope of this book. In this context suffice it to ask to what extent Marx's understanding of democracy requires a guiding rational principle. If this were the case, then on Spinoza's view, it will not be democratically constituted.

as is evident from my brief treatment of fear above and which I insist, against Matheron, is inseparable from his concern with self-interest. Second, I must remark upon the place of political economy in Spinoza's consideration of democracy, which is ignored. In light of the brevity of his remarks on economic equality, this is not surprising.⁵⁰ Whereas in the discussion of the origin of the Hebrew democratic commonwealth Spinoza seeks to uncover the common element, fear, unifying the indefinitely many subjective experiences of the natural state that gives rise to the election of God, in his discussion of the endurance of the original Hebrew state, after he addresses the patriotism consequent upon the legal daily ritual that constituted the particularity or uniqueness of the Hebrews, Spinoza seeks to uncover the objective element that "proved to be most effective in deterring citizens from contemplating defection and from ever wanting to desert their country, to wit, the motive of *self-interest*, the strength and life of all human action. This, I say, was a feature *peculiar* to this state."⁵¹ As he notes, the *peculiar* attention to self-interest in the original legal institution of the state took the form of absolute equality of ownership, a form that recognizes self-interest as a primary and *objective* dimension of the legitimacy of the commonwealth in which citizen and subject are identical. "Nowhere else did citizens have stronger right to their possessions than did the subjects of this state, who had *an equal share* with the captains in lands and fields and were each the owner of *their share in perpetuity*."⁵² Moreover, even when individuals were compelled by need to sell (alienate) their property, the law required that it be restored to them during the jubilee, and "there were other similar enactments to prevent *the alienation of real estate*."⁵³ Spinoza

⁵⁰ In this light the fact that the TP breaks off at the beginning of the discussion of democracy is especially unfortunate since, it is safe to assume that, the consideration of the concrete conditions for democracy at the time, as distinct from those he attributes to the originary Hebrew Commonwealth, would have involved a sustained discussion of an equality of whatever kind of ownership may be required for full citizenship as a necessary condition for both security and freedom.

⁵¹ Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* 17, 205. My emphasis.

⁵² *Ibid.* My emphases.

⁵³ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

concludes this brief reflection on the economic basis of the exceptional stability and duration of the Hebrew Commonwealth, a basis he presents as materially objective, with a remarkable observation that sheds light not only on the specificity of the Hebrew Commonwealth but, more important, on this election: "Thus the Hebrew citizens could enjoy a good life only in their own country; abroad *they could expect only hurt and humiliation.*"⁵⁴ Viewed in this light, the homeless "Jew," whose commonwealth is no longer possible, is a specter, a despised specter in the Christian commonwealth whose rejection, as Christian, she embodies or legally personifies. So long as the state remains a Christian state, overtly or covertly, so long as its institutions and rituals remain rooted in religious Christian symbols, the Jew could not be its citizen, even if she is its subject.

In anticipation of the objection that Spinoza's understanding of equality as property ownership is radically at odds with Marx's view of property as exemplary of the alienated existence in bourgeois civil society, the subject of his sustained ongoing critique, I can only reply, "Of course, if we ignore history." For it cannot be overemphasized that the democratic equality of which Spinoza speaks in the TTP refers to the original Hebrew Commonwealth, which, he insists, has not existed since its demise nor can exist again. The interruption of the TP by Spinoza's death is all the more poignant because it occurs at the beginning of his discussion of democracy, the form of commonwealth he describes as "the completely absolute state."⁵⁵ Moreover, it is important to note that the TTP is addressed, first and foremost (even if covertly), to the educated Calvinist authorities, whom Spinoza sought to convince that the imposition of religious rules on the nascent Dutch republic would undermine its chances for peace

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* My emphasis. In the preceding discussion of the daily ritual, a ritual that emphasizes the election of the Jews as an opposition to others, Spinoza states that the opposition to other nations, a hatred prescribed as a mode of devotion and piety, "is the bitterest and most persistent of all kinds of hatred. And this was reinforced by the universal cause of the continuous growth of hatred, to wit, the reciprocation of hatred; for the other nations inevitably held them in bitter hatred in return." *Theological Political Treatise* 17, 204–5.

⁵⁵ Spinoza, *Political Treatise* 11, 135.

and prosperity. And, although there is no doubt that equality in the nascent republic was based upon property ownership, what is striking about Spinoza's argument is his insistence that ownership should not be a matter of station or other privilege, that is, class. Instead, he argues for the objective, nonreligious conditions of peace and stability, an argument that implicitly intends to appeal to the self-interest of the sovereign power. And, again, as stated earlier, Spinoza's and Marx's idioms necessarily differ precisely insofar as they respond to different concrete material conditions, economic as well as religious/ideological ones. In contradistinction, the appeal to self-interest, to need as the basis of civil society, on one hand, and to alienation as source of social ill, on the other, is common to both thinkers.

In light of the preceding emphasis upon the two central aspects of Spinoza's political philosophy, the psychological and the economic, that is, the subjective and the objective, two questions must be raised: (1) Is the psychology of the affects of any interest to Marx? (2) Did Marx believe that religion as a need can be overcome? Now, there is no doubt that the psychology of the affects does not receive as extensive and independent a treatment in any of Marx's texts as it does in Spinoza's. However, although most considerations of Marx's discussion of alienation focus strictly on the alienation of labor, the sections on "Estranged Labor" and on "Private Property and Communism" in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*⁵⁶ make manifest the inseparable relation between religious/ideological alienation and economic alienation. In a manner reminiscent of Spinoza's distinction between the subjective (religious) and objective conditions that account for the stability and endurance of the Hebrew Commonwealth, Marx states:

Religious estrangement as such occurs only in the realm of *consciousness*, of man's inner life, but economic estrangement is that of *real life*; its transcendence therefore embraces both aspects.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Marx, "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 66-125.

⁵⁷ Marx, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 85.

And insofar as religious estrangement is an estrangement of consciousness, it is clearly a matter of the psychology of the affects. Moreover, affectively understood in relation to institutions of power whose maintenance depends upon the control of beliefs and opinions, the question of the overcoming of religion/ideology will depend upon the existence of concrete, material, that is, objective conditions, which will render such overcoming really possible.⁵⁸ Furthermore, to the extent that the institutions of power in question are the “secular” face of deeply entrenched theologico-political prejudices or *Weltaanschaungen*, the difference between religion and ideology is nominal. Marx’s seventh thesis on Feuerbach elucidates this claim most succinctly:

Feuerbach, consequently, does not see that the “religious sentiment” is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs in reality to a particular form of society.⁵⁹

Part III

a. From Marx’s TTP to the Critique of Religion and the “Jewish Question”

Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

– Thesis VIII

The standpoint of the old materialism is “civil” society; the standpoint of the new is *human* society, or socialized humanity.

– Thesis X

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.

– Thesis XI⁶⁰

⁵⁸ For an important reflection on the possibility of communism, see Marx’s *The German Ideology*, vol. 1, [section II.5](#), “Development of the Productive Forces as a Material Premise of Communism.” “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an idea to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things” (57).

⁵⁹ Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 145.

⁶⁰ The three “aphoristic” headings are taken from Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” 143–45. In relation to Thesis XI, see *Political Treatise* 1, where Spinoza

A careful analysis of the strange “text” that is the Notebooks is a philological project extending beyond the scope of this book and will require extensive consideration of the peculiar nature of this new TTP, with its reversal of the order of presentation, its specific selections and omissions, let alone the additions of selected letters. Nonetheless, since it is my claim that this strange new TTP is essential for understanding Marx’s critique of religion, the following brief consideration of “On the Jewish Question,” Marx’s most extensive and radical critique of religion, precisely in its theologico-political role, will take the form of provocations (inspired by Spinoza against Spinozism) rather than sustained analyses.

In light of my previous insistence that the TTP is a response to the concrete, material historical circumstances of seventeenth-century Holland, and is addressed to a specific audience, at the outset I want to suggest that Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” represents the only form that the TTP could possibly assume in 1843 Germany as a critical response to Hegel and the young Hegelians, that is, against those who implicitly or explicitly appropriated or violently incorporated Spinoza’s thought into Christo-Platonic speculative philosophy, thereby expelling the “jew” Baruch Spinoza from the philosophical canon and replacing him with Benedict Spinoza.⁶¹ Moreover, the singularity of this response can only be understood historically and materially in relation to both Feuerbach and Bauer, whose “secular” state, according to Marx, is only formally secular. I further want to suggest that “On the Jewish Question” could only be composed after the completion of the Notebooks, in which the fragmented selections include all of Spinoza’s TTP formulations of the distinction between nature (*physis*), abstractly or metaphysically

dismisses traditional political theory and philosophy as satire and fantasy, devoid of practical value.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Feuerbach’s discussions of Spinoza in *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*. Feuerbach’s turn to Spinoza’s purported pantheism as a form of materialism necessary to supplement Hegel’s critique of German Idealism is exemplary. As he states, “Hegelian philosophy is reversed idealism, just as Spinozist philosophy is theological materialism” (36).

understood, and specific laws and customs (*nomoi*), the one creating individuals, the others nations, including the one cited previously, as an introduction to the discussion of the commonwealth, as well as the following one on election:

Through this alone, then, do nations differ from one another, namely *by reason of the society and laws* [*ratione societatis et legum*] under which they live and are governed. Thus, the Hebrew nation was chosen by God before all others not by reason of its understanding nor of its spiritual qualities, but by reason of its social organization and good fortune whereby it achieved supremacy and retained it for many years.⁶²

Moreover, Marx's selected fragments concerning the uniqueness, that is, election, of the Hebrew Commonwealth are gathered in a manner such as to emphasize the distinction between spiritual/intellectual superiority and the material, that is, practical, prosperity that constituted the "election" of the Hebrews, an emphasis that simultaneously literally repeats the explanation of election in the TTP and, through extensive ellipses, intensifies its claims. The former excellence is theoretical and hence may be said to be ahistorical and apolitical, whereas the latter is material, historical, and political.⁶³ Moreover, by isolating some sentences and paragraphs from their surrounding discussion, Marx succeeds in rendering more visible, more exoteric, what in Spinoza's TTP is semi-hidden by prolonged historical discussions and seventeenth-century theologico-political idiom. Thus, for example, Marx isolates the following sentence: "*finis ergo Reipublica revera libertas est*"⁶⁴ (the end of the state, therefore, is truly freedom). That is, Marx highlights the emancipation that is the *end* of the state, in its double sense of purpose and overcoming. Elsewhere, by isolating a part of a long paragraph, and thereby creating a new "thesis," Marx brings to light a dimension

⁶² Marx, "Le Traité Théologico-Politique," 86 [142]. Marx's emphasis, absent in Spinoza's TTP. This fragment also belies one of Matheron's claims, discussed earlier, namely, that Spinoza had no interest in the Jewish projection of election.

⁶³ The emphasis here is on "may be said to be," since for neither Marx nor Spinoza does the natural state exist as such.

⁶⁴ Marx, "Le Traité Théologico-Politique," 44 [37].

of Spinoza's discussion of the Hebrew Commonwealth that may be obscured by the abundant discussion. One such "lost" dimension can be made evident from my modified translation of one sentence in this newly formed paragraph: "*Videlicet Religionis dogmata non documenta, sed jura et mandata erant, pietas justitia, impietas crimen et injustitia aestimabatur*"⁶⁵ (Clearly, religious doctrines were not teachings but laws and commands; piety was judged to be justice, impiety a crime and injustice). In contrast to my translation of "*Religionis dogmata non documenta sed jura et mandata erant...*," Shirley's English translation reads, "The tenets of religion were not *just* teachings but . . ." ⁶⁶ Whereas Marx, following Spinoza, highlights precisely what is extraordinary about the identity of civil law and religion in the Hebrew Commonwealth, namely, the absence of *dogmata*, by adding the seemingly innocent term "just" to Spinoza's text, Shirley distorts it in a manner contradictory to Spinoza's letter and spirit.

Since both Spinoza and Marx view the aim of the state as freedom, that is, since they view the question of "election" as a practical, political matter, the exclusive exclusion that constitutes "election" becomes a moment of contestation about human liberation, religious or political, transcendental/spiritual, or historical. Or, yet again, the question of the human liberation that Marx distinguishes from "the emancipation of the Jews" becomes a question of the relation and distinction, sameness and difference, between the natural and civil state. If the natural state (*status naturalis*) is not really distinct from the civil state (*status civilis*), which separation is at the core of the modern conception of civil society as the overcoming of the state of nature (*status naturae*) critiqued by both Spinoza and Marx, then the question becomes how does "nature" appear in different forms of political

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 54 [58].

⁶⁶ Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* 17, 196. My emphasis. It is important to note that Shirley's translation is still the best translation of the TTP and that the "bias" of which I speak here is not deliberate or "conscious." But, this is precisely a manifestation of the problem of the occlusion originating in appropriations of materialist historical works.

associations and whether there can be a civil society, or human community, whose institutions do not require alienation, especially the alienation of purportedly natural rights. And, here, the distinction between the democratic exclusive election of God that founds the Hebrew Commonwealth and the excluding “election” of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) German Jew is crucial for understanding the “Jewish Question.” For this form of “election,” sustaining the Jew as alien is a powerful form of the repression of the general alienation characteristic of the Modern civil society and the nation-state, which repression fosters existing religious superstition, forcefully maintaining the direction of the primary theologico-political affects – fear and hope.⁶⁷

Viewed from the perspective of the Notebooks, the most “repulsive” dimension of Marx’s “On the Jewish Question,” the emphasis on the self-interested huckster whose worldly God is money, the Jew as the practical expression of concrete need, is a response to Bauer’s theoretical or theological Jew, the “Sabbath Jew,” or, in a somewhat different vein, to Kant’s Palestinians, cowards and liars.⁶⁸ Hence, the question arises, is Marx’s practical huckster, the empirical, vulgar, historical other of Bauer’s theoretical Jew? I think not. For, were this the case, it would be no less abstract than Bauer’s theoretical Jew. How, then, are we to understand the practical Jew simultaneously as the conceptual or subjective other of the theoretical Jew and as a reflection of concrete objective conditions, which conditions are always in excess of the concept of “the Jew,” cannot be subsumed by it, and which, if they can be “overcome” at all, can only be overcome materially, historically, and concretely, that is, practically? As I already indicated, I think that the Notebooks shed some light on the question of who Marx’s practical Jew may be. For, again, nature creates individuals, whereas customs, laws, and *superstitions* create nations.

⁶⁷ The centrality of libidinal economy to Spinoza’s discussion of politics not only becomes the focus of Freud’s work but also will heavily inform Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s thought, as will become evident in the following chapters.

⁶⁸ See the discussion of Kant in [Chapter 1](#).

If the Notebooks create a new TTP through selective rearrangements and omissions almost without comment,⁶⁹ Marx's treatment of Bauer's text creates a new text "On the Jewish Question" through continuous selective interventions in, commentaries on, and groupings of Bauer's two texts "On the Jewish Question." I want to suggest that some of the more "repulsive" elements of the text come about by means of the specific selections and by the deployment of Bauer's idiom against Bauer. Understood in the light of this, it may be argued that Marx deliberately seeks to highlight the repulsive, dogmatic nature of Bauer's seemingly objective theoretical analysis as an expression of theological dogmata and their insidious afterlife in the Modern conception of civil society, a society founded upon the dualist, Christo-Platonic opposition between independent egoistic individuals and moral citizens.

In response to Bauer's abstract discussion of the emancipation of the Jew in *Die Judenfrage*, a discussion that analyses the "question" first in terms of an opposition between Jew and Christian, and second as an opposition between religion and the state, Marx points out that Bauer's discussion is purely theological, and that even though it is critical, it remains a critical theology. More important, he adds that precisely "when the question ceases to be *theological*, Bauer's criticism ceases to be critical."⁷⁰ Insofar as Bauer views emancipation as the political emancipation of the Christian state from religion, not only can Bauer's Christian be emancipated but also the Jew cannot, unless she first embraces Christianity, even if only in its dissolution. Indeed, Bauer's Jew is precisely the anti-Christ(ian); her rejection of Christian universality, the necessary condition for the emancipation from religion, is a stubborn alienation from the universal human community (whose emergence as a "real" possibility was made by the sacrifice of God-Man) that is the precondition for political

⁶⁹ The comments provided by Marx are used only to clarify a text, e.g., by supplying a subject which has disappeared from view because of the fragmentary separation of sentences from their extended discussions rather than interventions in Marx's own voice.

⁷⁰ Marx, "On the Jewish Question," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 31.

emancipation in the civil society.⁷¹ In other words, Bauer's Jew is the one whose very nature is constituted by her deliberate adherence to her election as the other of the existing nations, that is, the Christian ones. Or, as Marx repeatedly points out, "Bauer regards the *ideal* and abstract essence of the Jew – his *religion* – as the *whole* of his nature. He, therefore, concludes *rightly* that" "the Jew contributes nothing to mankind when he disregards his own limited law, when he renounces his Judaism."⁷² That is, Bauer's Jew is unredeemed and unredeemable, at best, a specter of a-sociality. Viewed in this light, both in the Christian state, the only state in which emancipation is possible, and in the civil state, according to Bauer, "the Jew" is the one who, by nature, remains as the persistent obstacle to human emancipation. Yet, I wish to suggest, just as the pre-Modern Jew must be protected as a reminder of the sorry fate of those who do not embrace Christ as the only mode of salvation,⁷³ so Bauer's Jew is the natural remains and reminder of the threat of religious particularity to the "secular" civil state, a state whose civility depends upon a unified national particularity. Against Bauer's view of religion as the dialectical contradiction of political emancipation, an emancipation which (therefore) is made possible by religion, Marx states:

But since the existence of religion is the existence of a defect, the source of this defect must be sought in *the nature of the state itself*. Religion

⁷¹ Note that civil society must be distinguished from the civil state. The condition of the former is the alienation from nature and the formalization of purportedly natural rights into legal ones, whereas the latter denies a real distinction between the natural and the civil state. For, as Spinoza insists, and in my view Marx endorses, natural rights are precisely not human rights. When "right" is nothing but the extension of power, there is no distinction between fish individuals and "human" ones; and big ones by right eat little ones (*Theological Political Treatise* 16). Differently stated, human rights are not by nature but by laws, customs, etc.

⁷² Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 47. Emphasis on "rightly" is mine.

⁷³ One need only consult arguments for the protection of the Jews by prominent medieval philosophers, including those who benefited from Jewish intellectual expertise in biblical exegesis or those influenced by prominent Jewish thinkers, to realize the insidious reason for such protection. See Dobbs-Weinstein, "Jewish Philosophy," esp. 141–44 and n. 15.

no longer appears as the basis, but as the manifestation of secular narrowness. That is why *we* explain the religious constraint upon the free citizens by the secular constraint upon them. We do not claim that they must transcend their religious narrowness in order to get rid of their secular limitations. *We claim that they will transcend their religious narrowness once they have overcome their secular limitations.*⁷⁴

Continuously, both in the *Judenfrage* and thereafter, Marx turns Bauer's analyses upside down. Whereas, in Marx's critique, Bauer turns concrete, material, and economic secular questions into theological ones, Marx re-turns them into secular political problems. More important, for Marx, the transformation of concrete, material questions into theological ones is the insidious reinscription of superstition into history. In this light, Bauer's account of political emancipation is a reiteration of the Hegelian philosophy of history.⁷⁵ In response, Marx states, "History has for long enough been resolved into superstition; but we now resolve superstition into history."⁷⁶ To resolve superstition into history is to resolve the philosophy of history into concrete histories of material, economic relations and the religions/ideologies that sustain them. Differently stated, for Marx, the "Jewish Question" is not a "Jewish" question, let alone a question that can be understood in relation to individual Jews. Rather, for Marx, the "Jewish Question" is a human question. Hence, "the question of the *relation between political emancipation and religion* becomes for us a question of the *relation between political emancipation and human emancipation*. We criticize the religious failing of the political state by criticizing the political state in its *secular* form, disregarding its religious failings."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 47. My emphases.

⁷⁵ As already indicated in the previous chapter, a discussion of the identity between political freedom and human freedom in virtue of the overcoming of particularity in the state in Hegel's political philosophy is beyond the scope of this book. Here I need only recall attention to the fact that Bauer's theologico-political philosophy remains thoroughly influenced by Hegel's philosophy of history and philosophy of right in which the Jew has no place.

⁷⁶ Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 31.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

For Marx, clearly, the relation between religion and the state is necessarily antagonistic, irrespective of the particular religion involved; but, as antagonistic, it must first have a material, that is, secular, basis. Hence, the contradiction between religion, any religion, and the state is a material threat to the state. And, as Marx carefully argues, the politically liberated state may be a free state, but it is not a state whose citizens are free. The “free state,” a state that frees itself from religion by relegating religion to a private realm, is free by edict, so that the egoistic individual subject, whatever her beliefs may be, is the other of the free, moral citizen. Where religion and morality do not coincide as they do in the Christian state, their relation is necessarily antagonistic. In the “free state,” on one hand, the subject’s real, material needs are irrelevant to her “constitution” as free, and on the other, her freedom, that is, morality, serves as the vigilant guard against her other, “needy” self. Viewed in this light, political emancipation is active, self-alienation and repression. In contrast, Marx argues:

Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work and in his relationships, he has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers [*forces propres*] as *social* powers so that he no longer separates his social power from himself as *political* power.⁷⁸

Returning to the questions of who the “Jew” of “On the Jewish Question” is, and whether or not she can be free, I wish to state unequivocally that this “Jew” is an abstraction, or fiction, but a fiction that reflects the two aspects of the objective, concrete, material history of the German Jew. Just as the “German” is not by nature but by laws and customs, so is the “Jew.” Viewed in this light, the “Sabbath Jew” and the “Huckster Jew” are not contradictories but manifestations of the same concrete, social

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 46. Marx’s materialist use of the language of force/power is not only in concert with Spinoza’s and deserves a close study, but also it is worth noting that Marx is deploying the language of “forces propres” in a Spinozian manner, where the natural is the social, against Rousseau’s presentation of forces.

conditions and their ideological reflections. And, as already indicated, the spiritual/ideological alienation can be overcome *only* when real, concrete, economic alienation is overcome, rather than vice versa.⁷⁹ In fact, it is my claim that the entire text of “On the Jewish Question” is devoted to demonstrating precisely this thesis, which can also be said to be a concrete articulation of Thesis XI on Feuerbach. The interpretation of the world cannot bring about a change in consciousness since it does not affect oppressive conditions; rather only a change in the world may do so.

Marx’s two different formulations of the emancipation of the Jew in the second part of what is gathered together in “On the Jewish Question” in response to Bauer’s “*Die Fähigkeit der heutigen Juden und Christen frei zu werden*” (The capacity of present-day Jews and Christians to become free) provide an insight into the double aspect of the *real* fiction that is the German Jew.

1. In the final analysis, the *emancipation* of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from *Judaism*.⁸⁰
2. The social emancipation of the Jew is the *emancipation of society from Judaism*.⁸¹

Whereas the former formulation is abstract, for the opposition between the Jew and mankind here reflects the contradiction between abstract particularity and abstract universality and is, at best, political liberation, for “Judaism” is a social symptom of the narrowness of civil society,⁸² the latter is concrete human liberation. Quite precisely in opposition to Bauer’s Sabbath Jew, let alone Kant’s Jewish nation of merchants and liars, Marx views the question of Jewish emancipation, that is, an emancipation

⁷⁹ See quote from *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* referenced in note 56.

⁸⁰ Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 49. Marx’s emphasis.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 52. Marx’s emphasis. It is important to note that this sentence concludes the text.

⁸² “It is from its own entrails that civil society ceaselessly engenders the Jew.” *Ibid.*, 50. I can hardly imagine a more graphic description.

from the fiction that is the “Jew” in whatsoever form it is presented, as a question of *real, practical possibility* of human emancipation. “For the capacity of the present-day Jew to emancipate himself expresses the relation of Judaism to the emancipation of the contemporary world. The relation results *necessarily* from the particular situation of Judaism in the present *enslaved* world.”⁸³ Thus, indeed, it is only fitting that Marx concludes “On the Jewish Question” with the social emancipation of the Jew, that is, human emancipation.

The following chapters take up the question of the concrete possibility of human emancipation in the thought of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, arguing that their reflection on the “Jewish Question” after Marx, and in the shadow of Auschwitz, are still the most powerful materialist critiques of ideology and politics, resisting rationalist solutions to a-rational enduring ethical/political problems and making amply evident their theological, teleological, or, more precisely, “providential” origin and telos.

b. From Marx’s TTP to Hegel’s Philosophy of Right

The standpoint of the old materialism is “civil” society; the standpoint of the new is *human* society, or socialized humanity.

– Thesis on Feuerbach X

If the Notebooks represent the true, concrete historical form that Spinoza’s TTP as a *critique of religion* could assume in the nineteenth century, in general, then, the critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* is the first form that Spinoza’s TP, as a critique of political institutions, must assume in Germany, in particular. Marx’s claim that “all forms of the state have democracy *for their truth*,” is but a concrete historical encapsulation of Spinoza’s uncovering of the democratic possibilities in all forms of the non-absolute, that is, democratic state.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 48. My emphases.

Returning to my general claim that Marx's TTP provides the critical tools to his engagement with Hegel and the young Hegelians, I want to narrow it to the claim that the selections from the chapters on the commonwealth and the Hebrew Commonwealth are the core of Marx's critique of those who violently incorporated Spinoza's thought into a Christo-Platonic speculative philosophy, precisely because, all claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the purportedly Modern secular state of Hegel, Bauer, and Feuerbach is only formally secular, even in its most "liberated," French form. (This is also the reason why, despite my reluctance, I critically engaged Matheron's essay earlier.) Viewed in light of the principle "*omnis determinatio est negatio*," the significant determination adopted from Spinoza is the distinction between nature, abstractly or metaphysically conceived, and specific laws, customs, and prejudices; the former creates individuals, the latter nations. To repeat, in the light of the abbreviated nature of Marx's TTP, it is especially striking that he selected *all* of Spinoza's formulations of this distinction, including the following two on the specificity and uniqueness of the Hebrew Commonwealth as a *state*.

Through this alone, then, nations differ from one another, namely *by reason of the society and laws [ratione societatis et legum]* under which they live and are governed. Thus, the Hebrew nation was chosen by God before all others not by reason of its understanding nor of its spiritual qualities, but by reason of its social organization and good fortune whereby it achieved supremacy and retained it for a many years.⁸⁴ Clearly, religious doctrines were not teachings but laws and commands; piety was judged to be justice, impiety a crime and injustice.⁸⁵

That is, in contradistinction to the Christian state, of which the German state is but a covert form, and in which the Jew has no place, Marx, following Spinoza, highlights the absence of *dogmata* in the Hebrew Commonwealth. For, to recall, Christianity is the repudiation of Mosaic law, qua law, or its "overcoming"

⁸⁴ Marx, "Le Traité Théologico-Politique," 86 [142]. Marx's emphasis, absent in the TTP.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 54 [58].

by *dogmata*. Whereas in the Hebrew Commonwealth, freedom is the concrete freedom to enact laws and act accordingly, for Christianity, freedom is a metaphysical, extrahistorical freedom from laws. Insofar as the former is concerned with action, unlike the latter, it does not legislate what is true and false but only what is good and bad. Thus understood, the freedom to legislate is simultaneously the freedom to philosophize or freedom of belief.

Insofar as religion/ideology is the alienated form of consciousness reflecting material needs and institutions, economic and political, for both Spinoza and Marx, the critique of religion/ideology and that of political economy cannot be really separate. And, although it may seem strange that both turn to the critique of religion/ideology before they turn to the critique of political economy, both Spinoza and Marx are painfully aware that no thought can bring about change of institutions and hence try to discover modes in which a unified form of consciousness, masses for Spinoza, classes for Marx, may be forged so as to desire change/liberty and be able to bring it about when the material conditions for change present themselves.

The proximity between Spinoza's masses and Marx's proletariat is nowhere more *evident* in my view than in one of the most remarkable but *forgotten* (or occluded) moments in Marx concerning the *real*, that is, materially concrete, possibility of emancipation in Germany or the coming to be of "*socialized humanity*." Toward the end of the introduction to the "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," in response to the question of the reality of such possibility, Marx claims:

A class must be formed, which has *radical chains*, a class in civil society, a class which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, which does not claim a *particular redress* because the wrong which is done to it is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Marx, *Marx-Engels Reader*, Introduction, 64.

Before proceeding to comment on this passage, I want to recall the fact that *recht* means “law,” that is, that real political emancipation is an emancipation of the law rather than of the abstract subject consciousness. Insofar as Marx claims that the German state has committed a general wrong, he is claiming that it is an absolutely illegitimate state, or the state whose negation is the determination of the absolute, that is, democratic, state, or the state whose citizens are *subject* to no human ruler. But what is most remarkable about Marx’s first discussion of the proletariat is that its most important aspect is generally ignored with few exceptions (most noted of which is Balibar⁸⁷), namely, that the proletariat never exists, nor has ever existed *as a class* – it is certainly not the working class. It is a “class” whose unity as a single suffering, that is, passion, can only come into being through critical/intellectual intervention, which unity is nothing other than the formation of a single fear and single hope. And as Marx makes clear in language remarkably similar to Spinoza’s, the proletariat does not result from “*naturally existing* poverty, but poverty *artificially produced*, [it] is not the mass of the people mechanically oppressed by the weight of society, but the mass resulting from the disintegration of society and above all from the disintegration of the middle class.”⁸⁸ To paraphrase Spinoza, by nature there is no poverty and no class; these exist only by convention, custom, prejudice, in short, artifice. The only weapon against prejudice is critique. Lest I be misunderstood about the role of the philosopher and the power of reason, let alone be accused of turning Marx into a positivist or vulgar Marxist, I quote Marx: “It is clear that the arm of criticism cannot replace the criticism of arms. Material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses.”⁸⁹

Did Marx believe that need can be overcome? Perhaps. Suffice it to note that the “emancipation of society from Judaism” or

⁸⁷ Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics and Masses, Classes, Ideas*, esp. 125–49.

⁸⁸ Marx, *Marx-Engels Reader*, Introduction, 64.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Introduction, 60.

poverty is at the same time the overcoming or dissolution of the “Jewish Question,” the Jew as the despised emblem of material need and, thereby, of the state and of nationalism. Would Marx have still entertained this possibility as an objective one over a hundred years later? I seriously doubt it.

Afterword with Althusser

From the preceding it should be clear that, in my view, for neither Spinoza nor Marx is the liberation of politics from religion the emancipation of individual minds from ideology. For, even if individuals are motivated by self-interest and a single “class” consciousness, this does not entail that the form of consciousness is rational or scientific, or that, once humanized, the human animal, including the philosopher, ceases to be animal, freed from fear and hope, the primary theologico-political affects.

Judgment Day as Repudiation

History and Justice in Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno

History has for long enough been resolved into superstition; but we now resolve superstition into history.

– Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively. . . . Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity.

– Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” I

It is the inherent tendency of dialectical experience to dissipate the semblance of eternal sameness, and even of repetition in history. Authentic political experience is absolutely free of this semblance.

– Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N9, 5

Introduction: The Ambiguous Matter of Historical Materialism – Metaphysics or Politics

The title of this introduction is misleading, for the ambiguity or even equivocity it announces has been and continues to be occult to most self-proclaimed materialists, including historical materialists. Rather than pause critically in order to attend to Marx’s unambiguous rejection of “all hitherto existing materialism” as

disguised forms of a reinstated idealist metaphysics in different, more vogue garbs, most advocates of historical materialism collapse the distinction between metaphysical and historical materialism, thereby eliminating both the matter and history at stake in the distinction. Matter becomes the homogenous self-identical conceptual abstraction whose differentiation is the achievement of thought, or in Hegel's terms the unfolding of the Idea in space, or Nature; history becomes the progressive differentiation of "material" social institutions according to a teleological necessity determined by a unifying dialectical system, or in Hegel's terms, the unfolding of Spirit in Time. Clearly it is not Marx's rejection that introduces ambiguity, the rejection of "all hitherto existing materialism" is unequivocal; rather, it is the resistance of left Hegelians and many Marxists to his radical, critical deployment of the decidedly historical matter of historical materialism – bourgeois institutions and the ideology, that is, forms of alienated consciousness reflecting as well as sustaining them, religious, economic, political. Following Spinoza and against Hegel and Kant, the first moment of Marx's critique of ideology is the destruction of the fundamental superstition that grounds both religion and politics, even in its "secular" garb, namely, teleology, be it the Kantian providential one or the Hegelian one. This resistance to the radical nature of Marx's historical materialism is both philosophical and practical. For a dialectic without end, a dialectic whose subject matter is concrete, material conditions and their ideological forms, will not yield untimely truths, or Theory, and consequently, theory will not provide clear, unambiguous guidelines for practice. The view of the relation between theory and practice in which practice is understood as application is indeed untenable for Marx and is one he seeks to undermine from the very beginning. Ironically, the positivist appropriations of Marx, ones that privilege practice and attribute to Marx a devaluation of thinking, originate in the reading of the "Theses on Feuerbach," especially the final one. Such myopia is especially poignant with respect to a thinker who was as concerned with self-consciousness as he was with institutions of oppression and exploitation and for whom they were not really separable.

Against the positivist reading of Marx, it is my repeated claim throughout the book, its refrain, that Marx's most radical materialist heir to the question of the relation of theory and praxis, thinking and acting, is Adorno, whose writings after Auschwitz are singly focused upon the political consequences of the devaluation of thinking and the privileging of practice (instrumentally understood). Furthermore, I cannot overemphasize the fact that Adorno's understanding of historical materialism, as a critical dialectic, minutely engaged with concrete history and politics, is not only influenced by Benjamin but also emerges in and as a critical and fecund conversation with him, pace common readings of each thinker's work, let alone of the intellectual relation between them. This is one respect in which both Benjamin and Adorno still provide critical resources that are especially needed and wanting in the current political and academic climate. For a conversation between Benjamin and Adorno is fecund precisely insofar as it is critical. This is equally true about the conversation between Horkheimer and Adorno and is made amply evident in the preface to the new edition (1969) of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The critical dimension of the conversation is what justifies the claim that they both "feel equally responsible for every sentence" of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* not only because they dictated much of it together but, more important, because "the *Dialectic* derives its vital energy from the *tension* between the two intellectual temperaments which came together in writing it."¹ I suggest that we must read the reference to the *Dialectic* as a reference not only to the book but also to a materialist dialectics when it is engaged with history and politics.

Viewed in the light of the preceding, ironically, Karl Korsch's observation (or lament) about the fate of historical materialism is still resonant:

The formulas of materialist history that were applied by Marx and Engels . . . *solely* to the investigation of bourgeois society . . . have been detached by the Marxist epigones from the specific application, and in

¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xi. Second emphasis mine.

general *from every historical connection*; and out of the so-called historical materialism they have made a universal . . . sociological theory. From this . . . leveling of materialist theory of society, it was only a step to the idea that once again today . . . it was necessary to shore up the historical and economic science of Marx, not only with a general social philosophy but even with . . . *a universal materialist worldview* embracing the totality of nature and society.²

That Korsch's observation informed Benjamin's minutely concrete study named *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*) an exemplary, if dizzying, historical materialist dialectical study, each cited moment of which provides a unique experience with the past (to paraphrase the "Theses"), is not surprising. As a student of irony, Benjamin was keenly aware of the nonironic aspect of irony, that aspect bringing into relief the uncanny dissipating of "the semblance of eternal sameness." For, properly understood, the stated irony about the aptness of Koch's observation about materialist history, an irony constituted by the seemingly ahistorical nature of my claim about a critique of the ahistorical, is not at all ironic, let alone surprising. In fact, provided that by irony we do not understand subjective ridicule, sarcasm, even farce, the intensification of Marx's materialist history constituted by Korsche's, Benjamin's, and my seeming repetitions is concrete, that is, different historical mediations are attentive to Marx's materialism that seek to disclose the radical differences between historical materialism and its concrete dialectical expressions, on one hand, and metaphysical materialism and its unifying dialectical historicist articulation, on the other. It is indeed the latter's resistance to the former, its repulsion by the concretely sensuous, that is irreducible to the concept, that constitutes the persistence of metaphysical materialism, despite repeated critiques, each of which is repeatedly repressed either by theologico-political prohibition or by incorporation into, and in opposition to, historical change and challenge.³

² Karl Korsch, as quoted in Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 484–85. My emphases.

³ One of the most poignant, succinct formulations of repression by *incorporation*, and especially in relation to the complicity between the theologico-political and philosophical forms of repression in the formation of what we

Since it is my claim that metaphysical dogmatism and superstition are the persistent concrete forces of resistance to historical materialism, that is, change, sensuousness, and heterogeneity, that repeatedly occlude it (albeit in response to different circumstances), and since concrete forces of resistance are quintessentially political, the first part of this chapter seeks to articulate the contours of the polemos between metaphysics and politics, a polemos whose political nature has been and continues to be hidden precisely because of the triumph of dogmatism/metaphysics.⁴ The three cornerstones of the polemos will be constituted by the place of “matter or nature,” “history,” and “dialectics” in Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno. And, since we *love* our opinions and *hate* their contraries (to paraphrase Maimonides), since bringing to light another history and politics dialectically requires the destruction of persistent and resilient *dogmata*, a major part of this chapter, as well as subsequent ones, will engage the *dogmata* that have ossified the readings of Benjamin and Adorno and have successfully repressed the proximity between their thinking on history and politics and thereby assigned both of them to the dustbin of “once upon a time” there was a first and early second-generation Critical Theory,⁵ now superseded by a third generation.

Two provisos are required before proceeding. (1) Since the chapter is not *about* Marx, since it stages a polemos with all orthodoxies, I shall ignore the substance of the debates about the “real Marx.”⁶ (2) For the same reason, I do not claim that my

name the philosophical tradition, is in my view found in Derrida, “Secrets of European Responsibility,” in *Gift of Death*, 1–34.

⁴ It should be noted that, with few exceptions, I use the terms *metaphysics*, *dogmatism*, *superstition*, and *religion* interchangeably, for reasons that shall become evident as the polemos unfolds. For an explicit treatment of their proximity, see Dobbs-Weinstein, “Power of Prejudice” and “Whose History?”

⁵ I return to the once-upon-a-time version of history or the past, which Benjamin names both a fairy tale and a whore.

⁶ I have in mind debates about the relations between the early and late Marx, Marx’s “humanism” or “a-humanism” mentioned in the previous chapter in the “Excursus on Althusser,” etc.

readings of Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno are the only possible legitimate readings; on the contrary. For, as an historical materialist, I take the prism through which a question or questions are addressed and the *dogmata* which they seek to undo as concrete determinations of the readings.

Irrespective of Marx's later description of *The German Ideology* as a settling of accounts with his and Engels's philosophical conscience undertaken in order to achieve self-clarification,⁷ or perhaps precisely because of it, this text provides the earliest, explicit, and succinct exposition of a materialist history. For the process of self-clarification, a process begun as a concrete critique of the prevalent philosophical opinions of the young Hegelians, is the material process whereby it becomes evident that the reversal of Hegel's abstract concepts by purportedly sensuous ones remains abstract and, more problematically, insidious. In fact, the process of self-clarification that is concluded in *The German Ideology* not only provides the first succinct account of Marx's understanding of materialist history precisely in opposition to prevailing conceptions and productions of histories but also sheds light on the texts preceding it, such as "On the Jewish Question" and "Theses on Feuerbach," each of which constitutes a concrete dialectical engagement with prevalent philosophical opinions. For the matter of a materialist dialectic is the historically specific opinions *produced* by philosophers and reflecting the material conditions of their production. So long as the material conditions, the "object," is the object of thought determined by the subject, the objectivity of material conditions, their sensuousness, remains abstract. The entire text of the "Theses on Feuerbach" is devoted to arguing that abstract thinking, whether it is of the universal ("civil society") or particular (individual), is a mystifying metaphysics that occludes the fact that sensuous human life, including thinking life, is always already social, active, or productive. Differently stated, for Marx, Feuerbach's "sensuous contemplation" is a myth whose resolution is not its theoretical

⁷ Marx, "Marx on the History of His Opinions," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 5–6.

overcoming but rather its dissolution into its origin “in practice and the comprehension of this practice.”⁸

Just as Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” is a concrete, historical dialectical engagement with the opinions/superstitions of the most eminent materialist metaphysicians of his time, “On the Jewish Question” presents a similar engagement with those of Bruno Bauer on “Politics.”⁹

The embarrassed and apologetic responses to Marx’s engagement with the most egregious theologico-political prejudices of his day mark the extent to which Marx’s faithful readers fail to appreciate the historical nature of his dialectical critique.¹⁰ For the embarrassment with Marx’s emphasis on the self-interested “huckster Jew,” whose worldly God is *Mammon*, is suspected to represent Marx’s opinion about Jews in general. That is, Marx’s presentation of the “practical Jew” is seen not only as the counterpart of Bauer’s “theoretical or theological Jew,” the “Sabbath Jew,” but also as a reflection of his understanding of the empirically or historically *real* other of Bauer’s “theoretical Jew.” But, as should be evident from the discussion of “On the Jewish Question” in the preceding chapter as well as the discussion of Feuerbach, were this the case, the “huckster Jew” would be no less abstract than Bauer’s “theoretical Jew.” Indeed, the emphasis upon the “practical Jew” is intended to return the question of emancipation to the only place where emancipation is meaningful, indeed, *possible*. Emancipation is a practical, political question and, as practical, it is a question of political economy rather than theologico-political philosophy, abstractly understood. Just as the “Sabbath Jew” is an abstraction, so is the “huckster Jew” *as a Jew*. Differently stated, the “Huckster Jew” is, on the one

⁸ Marx, *Marx-Engels Reader*, Thesis VIII, 145.

⁹ Both the scare quotes and capitalization are intended to alert the reader to the problematic nature of the term. For, as I argued in [Chapter 2](#), Bauer’s conception of the “state” is still thoroughly theological, and Marx’s critique is first theologico-political and subsequently reduced to its proper economic-political basis.

¹⁰ Tucker’s embarrassed and apologetic note preceding the text is exemplary. See *Marx-Engels Reader*, 26.

hand, the person of practical need in any civil society, a society in which emancipation remains a formal question and, on the other, the ideological reflection of the social and political institution whose parasitic perpetuation of need it serves to shield.

Beginning with the prevalent abstract categories that form the building blocks of German Idealist philosophy, and precisely insofar as these categories must reflect concrete conditions, *The German Ideology* deploys some of the prevalent abstractions against the ideologues by situating them, materially, historically, or concretely, in order to use them as premises in “a science of history.” Poignantly and explicitly the text underscores the difference between speculation (idealist) and positive science: “Where speculation ends – in real life – there real, positive science begins: the representation of practical activity, of the practical process of development of men.”¹¹ In juxtaposition to speculative abstractions, Marx and Engels “posit” the “empirically vulgar” (Kant) or “ontic” (Heidegger). Since the concerns of *The German Ideology* are historically different than mine, since the “self-clarifications” we seek necessarily differ, I shall not discuss this text further. Before proceeding, however, I wish to underscore what Marx and Engels present as the *primary* premise of history in the introductory remarks to the discussion of history, a presentation whose deliberately crude form is uniquely telling.

Since we are dealing with Germans who are devoid of premises, we must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of *all history*, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history” [marginal reference to Hegel]. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, habitation, clothing and many other things.¹²

Following this seemingly crude, surely “vulgar” observation, we find the first, fundamental premise of history: “the first *historical*

¹¹ Marx, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 155. It must be noted that by “positive science,” Marx does not intend positivist science. Rather, positive science here takes as its object the “*human sensuous activity*,” emphasized in the first Thesis of “Theses on Feuerbach.”

¹² *Ibid.*, 155–56. My emphasis.

act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. *And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history*, which today as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.”¹³ Insofar as the German idealists disdain the “vulgar,” insofar as they deliberately ignore the fundamental “condition of all history,” they have never “had an *earthly* basis for history and consequently never a historian.”¹⁴ Against Hegel, for whom need or even the “system of needs” which constitutes the first moment of civil society cannot be a premise of history, cannot enter into history, whose proper actor is the State, Marx introduces the most fundamental material human needs. Hegel’s philosophy of history has as little to do with history, on this reading, as metaphysics has with politics.

The most weighty obstacle to my discussion of historical materialism thus far, and the one that has continued to generate the greatest ideological animus, concerns the status of dialectics in Marx, especially in relation to teleology. And, indeed, insofar as Marx’s dialectics is understood to be a universal method, insofar as science is understood as a unified and unifying endeavor, merely Hegel’s dialectic turned upside down, and insofar as history is understood to be driven by a teleological necessity, either my reading of Marx would turn out to be, at best, idiosyncratic, or Marx’s historical materialism is rife with inconsistencies. But, as already stated several times, my concern is not with Marxist orthodoxy, except to the extent that the orthodoxy in question is a political force. Nor, properly speaking, is my concern with consistency or inconsistency among Marx’s works; on the contrary. In fact, as my argument thus far should make evident, in my view the demand for consistency betrays the endorsement of

¹³ *Ibid.*, 156. My emphasis. Cf. the citation opening Part I of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, “life does not live.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.* It is worth recalling that the philosophy of history is the secular garb of the Augustinian theology of history, giving rise to a teleological, progressive conception of history. Were it not for the “heavenly” city, the “earthly” city would not exist.

a universal dialectical method ignoring the concrete conditions, questions to which, and audiences to whom, different texts are addressed. Likewise, no form of an historical materialism and no materialist history can be teleological. As should be evident from Part VI of the preceding chapter, this suggestion is at odds with the assigned role of the proletariat in Marx's works only if we ignore the fact that the proletariat has never existed *as a class*. Nonetheless, and in lieu of defending my argument against teleology here any further, I quote at length Marx's explanation in *The German Ideology* of what he understands by history, which explanation both supports my argument and links it to the preceding discussion.

History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity. This can be *speculatively distorted so that later history is made the goal of earlier history* . . . Thereby history receives its own special aims and becomes "a person ranking with other persons . . . , while what is designated with the words "destiny," "goal," "germ," or ideal of earlier history is *nothing more than an abstraction formed from later history*, from the active influence which earlier history exercises on later history.¹⁵

Lest it appear that by active influence Marx intended to indicate a linear progression, even in the absence of a defined telos, in a remarkably consistent tone, approximately six years later, Marx claims, "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living."¹⁶ This stark statement should be borne in mind when reading Benjamin's and Adorno's discussions of history and politics, exemplified by Benjamin's statement in Thesis VI that even the dead are not safe from the enemy who has not ceased to be victorious.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 172. My emphases.

¹⁶ Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 595.

Part I. Undoing the Fate of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfillment of past hopes. Today, however, the past is being continued as destruction of the past.¹⁷

The textual fate of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*¹⁸ provides simultaneously a unique example of the concretely material and multifaceted destiny/history of books, a history which is always already political – even when a work is not explicitly political – and an instance of why attentiveness to Marx’s historical materialism, and materialist dialectics, must eschew (to the extent possible) universal categories, concepts, and terms. Whereas the latter express *and enforce* reigning ideologies in all their variations, the former is not merely a dialectical critique of ideology or extrinsic forms of power, although this is a necessary first step, but more important, it also provides an intrinsic critique that undermines all universal claims precisely by disclosing the material conditions that power seeks to legitimate, and their optionality. For ideology “continues the traditional activity” not only “in completely changed circumstances” but also, and more important, *despite the completely changed circumstances*. That is, understood through a Spinozian lens, ideology is prejudice, often shored up by superstition.¹⁹ Clearly this formulation is still rather crude and reductive, for it necessarily ignores nuances intrinsic to concrete, historical forms that ideology as well as critical activity may assume. Nonetheless, at present, suffice it to underscore the fact that by the power of ideology and its maintenance, as well as by politics, I understand all institutional structures that seek to maintain themselves unchanged despite material changes.

¹⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii.

¹⁸ For reasons that will become evident, and since my concern is with historical transmission, all references will be to the recent, new English translation and re-edition of the text, whose accompanying essays shed important light on its political destiny.

¹⁹ It cannot be overemphasized that, for Spinoza, the primary superstitions are the belief in teleology and the will of God, which he describes as “the sanctuary of ignorance.” See *Ethics* 1 Appendix.

The textual history of the three different German editions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as of the Italian one, is exemplary of the multifaceted power of ideology, including its academic expressions, and of Horkheimer's and Adorno's concrete responses to it. And while the fate of many books had been violently determined by ecclesiastico-political powers, that of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is exceptional insofar as the explicit and "unchanging" concern of its authors, a concern expressed in the 1947 changes to the 1944 "original" text, and commented upon in the diverse prefaces to distinct publications, is ironically mimicked in the concrete history of the book's publications, an irony which, inter alia, belies a real distinction in kind between pre-Enlightenment ecclesiastico-political exercises of power and seemingly secular ones.²⁰

Among the responses to and explanations for the changes by serious readers of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there is one whose uneasy, often apologetic tone is concerned (more or less explicitly) with faithfulness to Marx, that is, with ideology. To be sure, the bulk of the changes, more than half, are changes to Marxist terms/concepts.²¹ Those concerned are especially ill at ease because of the 1947 supplementary claim to the 1944 preface that "the book contains no essential changes to the text completed during the war."²² Ironically, both the form and the content of the apologetic responses to the changes make evident the fact that readers find the claim *incredible* or *untrue*. Moreover,

²⁰ The concern of this chapter precludes the painstaking analyses of its textual histories, which analyses are pressing desiderata. Hence, my critique will be limited to two theoretical responses to textual/terminological changes to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the absence of such analyses, I urge the reader to consult the "Editor Afterword" to the text, which provides invaluable information about political considerations leading up to the Italian edition and neutralizing its final, skeletal preface, the ones preceding and leading to the 1969 edition, as well as the more vulgar denunciation of the reissued text in a 1969 Frankfurt student paper. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Editor Afterword," 217–47, esp. 237–47.

²¹ See "The Position of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the Development of Critical Theory," in Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Editor Afterword," 239.

²² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xix.

common to the responses that accompany the superior new Stanford translation is a recognition that the changes are occasioned by changed historical circumstances, a recognition that, in my view, is also a misrecognition of the nature of the historical, a misrecognition made evident by the different “material” conditions each response identifies as the reason for the “repudiation” of certain traditional Marxist concepts. Briefly stated, whereas Schmid Noerr identifies the material changes in the usurpation of traditional Marxist concepts by Soviet-type statism in a manner such that they have lost their critical potential, Willem van Reijen and Jan Bransen reduce them to the theoretical debate within Critical Theory in which Horkheimer and Adorno are claimed to have distanced themselves from advocates of the primacy of economics in favor of politics (Pollock). Now, while neither response is inaccurate, both are partial and superficial, at least insofar as they are inattentive to the authors, an inattentiveness coextensive with their beliefs about authentic “traditional” Marxism. A brief consideration of Schmid Noerr’s response suffices to substantiate my claim.

Schmid Noerr provides two explanations/justifications for the repudiation of some Marxist concepts, one of which is at best casuist, the other true but superficial, and both highlight the extent to which historical materialism remains undigested by readers of Marx, and many subsequent “historical materialists.” The first explanation claims that “one important motive” for the changes was the “concern to avoid making political enemies,” in order to forestall harm to the Institute for Social Research or its members. And while it is certainly the case that Horkheimer and Adorno were exquisitely aware of the political nature of language, were such worry sufficient reason for self-censorship, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would not have been written in the first place. The second explanation, the one mentioned earlier, provides a specific reformulation of a repeated concern of the authors, a concern expressed explicitly in the preface to the first edition about the tendency of language “toward complicity with the prevailing intellectual tendency”²³ and its easy usurpation

²³ *Ibid.*, xv.

and suppression by social-political forces. As will become evident, it is not the usurpation of Marxist concepts by Soviet ideology that rendered the changes necessary; rather, the changed historical circumstances render Marx's concepts and idiom inadequate to a dialectical critique of existing institutions and the ideologies serving to legitimate them informed by Marx.

As already stated, the uneasy tone and content of the responses, their attempt to rescue the authors from charges of a betrayal of both Marxist theory and Critical Theory, that is, the charges of heterodoxy, disclose a *disbelief* in the 1947 claim that the book remains essentially unchanged *despite the changed terminology*, with the exception of the addition of "Elements of Antisemitism." The partial and superficial nature of the identification of the changed material conditions giving rise to the changes make evident an ahistorical bias about the relation between truth (read: theory, concepts, and the language attendant upon them) and material conditions. This bias also explains the failure to read the 1947 preface in light of the 1969 preface, where the authors are explicit about what they understand by a material history and dialectical materialism as an *historical practice*. More important and extensive, it discloses the inability or resistance to attend to a "refrain" in this text, as well as other works, stating that a belief, statement, etc., is both true and false, a claim about universal statements that is thoroughly historical and dialectical. Succinctly put, statements are either universal or historical, although the "untruth" of universal statements reflects the effective truth of reigning ideologies.

Before proceeding to concrete analyses of the political matter of historical materialism in Benjamin's and Adorno's consideration of the irreducible difference between justice and Judgment Day, a difference that must be read in the light of the radical difference between politics and theology or Marx's Spinozian view of history and politics and Hegel's expulsion of the "jew" from history and politics, it is important to briefly consider further the 1969 preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in order to provide sharper insight to claims about the relation between material conditions, historical changes, and Critical Theory. Commenting on the need to reissue the text more than twenty years after its first

publication, Horkheimer and Adorno point to two determining reasons, namely, continued diverse requests for its republication and the timeliness of “not a few” of its ideas, which ideas “have largely determined our later theoretical writings.” I wish to linger for a moment on the nature of this timeliness twenty years later both in the light of the changes to the text and in order to shed light on what I mean by the timeliness of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s writing on history and politics in the current political climate both within and without the academy. The timeliness of the ideas expressed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seems to be put into question almost immediately after it is announced. In the following, second paragraph of the preface, they write:

We do not stand by everything we said in the book in its original form. That would be incompatible with a theory which attributes a temporal core to truth instead of contrasting truth as something invariable to the movement of history. . . . In not a few places, however, the formulation is no longer adequate to the reality of today.²⁴

The juxtaposition of the timeliness of the ideas and the inadequacy of the formulations is key to understanding the dialectical “consistency” of the two claims. It is also key to understanding the relation of Critical Theory to practice, including intellectual practice. Ideas or truths are not timely in an ahistorical manner; quite the contrary. They can, however, provide critical insight into concrete historical changes. The primary “idea” motivating *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the one that continued to determine Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s later theoretical writings, is precisely the tendency of enlightenment to regress into myth, of culture to regress into barbarism, of reason to harbor irrationality. And, as the 1944–47 preface to the book makes evident, antisemitism is the exemplary, even archaic form of the “reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism *in reality*.”²⁵ The concrete, that is, real, forms of this tendency have changed significantly between the two publications with the destruction of some economic and

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, xix. My emphasis.

political institutions and the emergence of others, just as they have changed between the 1969 publication and the present. To have retained the same idiom in the light of these changes would be to distort what is timely about the book *now*. At the same time, if we shed orthodoxies of whatsoever kind, Marxist as well as Liberal, we may not only be able to read without recoil the claim that the changes are few but also understand that they are so few precisely because “to bring the text fully up to date with *the current situation* would have amounted to nothing less than writing a new book.”²⁶ And in fact, all of their subsequent writings continue the project of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the current situation, a project whose aim is to “preserve and disseminate freedom” against the pressing tendency toward the administered world, a world made possible by the annihilation of the subject of experience, the subject capable of freedom, the subject of “a human society or socialized humanity.”²⁷

Part II. The Abyss between Political Justice and Theological Judgment Day

Spite is the affect that his thought repeatedly induces as though one were always wanting to catch it out. Adorno is an irritant. Not only because many of those by whom he is feted today are exactly like the people whose ways of thinking and behaving were for him an absolute horror, but also because his native genius is inseparable from an idiosyncratic sensibility, a sense that one either shares or does not and that can scarcely be judged from outside.

– “Adorno’s Rabbits; or Against Being Right”²⁸

Kafka’s genius lay in the fact that he tried something altogether new: he gave up truth so that he could hold on to its transmissibility, the haggadic element.

So, as Kafka says, there is an infinite amount of hope – only not for us.

– Letter to Gershom Scholem on Franz Kafka²⁹

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xii. My emphasis.

²⁷ Cf. [Chapter 2](#).

²⁸ Düttmann, “Adorno’s Rabbits; or, Against Being Right.”

²⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 3:326–27.

That throughout Benjamin's thought the question of justice and of Judgment Day is a single question is not disputable; nor do I think that the proximity of either of these concepts and problems to violence are cause for much debate. But, to make a similar claim about Adorno's thought, and to further argue that nowhere is Benjamin's influence on Adorno more evident seems rather outlandish, or at least idiosyncratic. This is especially true since Benjamin's discussions of justice and Judgment Day are generally read as instances of Kabbalist influences upon his thought, whereas whatever other spite Adorno's thought may provoke, accusations of mystical leanings are not generally among them, ironically with few exceptions, most notable among which is Habermas, in *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science and Politics*. In this 1968 collection of essays, in an essay entitled "Technology and Science as 'Ideology,'" dedicated to Marcuse on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, in which Habermas presents Marcuse's project as a utopian dream of a New Science with a revolutionary potential for overcoming domination, he first traces this hope to "the promise familiar in Jewish and Protestant mysticism of a 'resurrection of fallen nature.'" Habermas further argues that this promise is found in Schelling, Marx's *Paris Manuscripts*, Bloch, and "in reflected forms, also directs the *more secret hopes* of Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno."³⁰ Adorno's secret hope – really?

Now, while I agree with Habermas about the "Jewish origin" of the proximity between Benjamin's and Adorno's thought, as should be evident from the discussion of "negative theology" in [Chapter 1](#), I disagree thoroughly about the mystical nature of the Jewish dimension of their respective works, a common enough attribution to much of Benjamin's work, for reasons that are decidedly not philosophical. I also question the conflation of Jewish and Protestant mysticism, of Schelling and Marx. Hence, since most of the misreadings of both Benjamin's and Adorno's writing on History and Politics ironically originate in a decidedly Christo-Platonic reading of Jewish motifs, before I proceed to

³⁰ Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, 67–68.

a substantive discussion of the complicity between violence and the hope for redemption which forms the core of Benjamin's and Adorno's repeated reflections on the problems of justice and/or law, I must again clear some common misconceptions first discussed in [Chapter 1](#) by removing the seemingly innocent hyphen from the single Judaeo-Christian tradition whose unification was brought about with the violence that always accompanies praxis for the sake of future redemption, that is, in anticipation of Judgment Day.

I must begin again with a very blunt statement about Habermas's judgment just cited: Habermas does not understand Jewish thought. Were it the case that Marx, Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno were harboring a "secret hope," it would resemble Kafka's expression of hope: "an infinite amount of hope, but not for us." Likewise, it would resemble the hope expressed by the allusion to Spinoza in Freud's quotation of Heine at the end of Chapter 9 of *Future of an Illusion*, where Freud dares to imagine or hopes for the community of unbelievers who will "leave Heaven to the angels and the sparrows,"³¹ an allusion repeated in Freud's Jokes Book. This is also the hope expressed in the contrary to fact subjunctive mood that characterizes Jewish humor, the only humor possible for those without hope. This is the mood whose orientation is always to the past as the only source of (im)possibility poignantly evident in Kafka's story about the beggar's wish, a wish that he exchanges for its fulfillment or a hope in no need of hope,³² freed from external constraint or paternal guilt. For now suffice it to claim that this is a "hope" that serves to reorient the question of justice and history from a concern *for* the future to the concern *with* past and present injustice. And, as I shall argue, it is the utopian moment that serves to inoculate against utopian expectations in Adorno's aesthetics and politics and accounts for the demand for a negative dialectics. It is also, pace the various forms of spite against Adorno, thoroughly political.

³¹ Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 63.

³² Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," in *Selected Writings*, 2:794–851.

Now, the single most unphilosophical origin of the misreadings of Benjamin's work as mystical is his friendship with Gershom Scholem. This is rather strange. First, it is worth noting that, although Scholem was indeed the foremost scholar of Kabbalah at the time, he was neither a Kabbalist nor a mystic.³³ Second, to read Benjamin's deployment of "religious" terminology or deployment of Kabbalist images in a literal way is to fail to read literally enough his insistence on "brushing history against the grain," a method at the heart of a historical-materialist critique beginning with Marx's theologico-political critique of Feuerbach and Bauer. Third, and most important, to attribute to Jewish thought the hope for a resurrection of fallen nature is to assimilate it into Christianity without remainder. The unbridgeable abyss between Schelling and Marx can be crystallized as one between ontological evil and political injustice. There is no fall, let alone fallen nature, in Jewish thought. However varied the interpretations of Adam's and Eve's transgression by Jewish thinkers were, none speaks of a fall, let alone one in need of redemption. According to Maimonides, Adam's and Eve's act of transgression resulted in the acquisition of knowledge of "good" and "bad," that is, it is the origin of normative categories. In short, to read a hope for redemption of fallen nature into Jewish thought is to ignore the absolute prohibitions against the preparation for the messianic age, a prohibition explicitly invoked by both Benjamin and Adorno. And, with respect to history and politics,

³³ In "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," Scholem explicitly derides this identification when he recounts his and Benjamin's prankish invention of the Central and State University of Muri. After placing both "philosopher" and "kabbalist" inside quotation marks, he continues, "who in a traditional sense were neither a philosopher nor a kabbalist – made the traditional university and its scholars the object of their derision." Smith, *On Walter Benjamin*, 64–65. Habermas's persistent ignoring of this "slight" difference between scholarship and commitment, between the Jewish and the Christian, is especially striking when he insists upon speaking of "us" in a tribute to Gershom Scholem, a feat he accomplishes by "the affinities between the theosophy of Jacob Böhme and the teaching of a man by the name of Isaac Luria." "Gershom Scholem," in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, 200. This essay is deeply troubling in many ways. Since they are not directly relevant to this book, I shall not comment on them further.

this prohibition is as, if not more, important than the one against graven images, that is, mimesis, the critique of which forms the core of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as most of Adorno's subsequent writings, including the *Philosophy of New Music*, which, as already indicated in the introduction, he describes as the third excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and which will be further discussed in the following chapters.

Given, on one hand, the Christo-Platonic obstacles to taking into account the thoroughly political nature of the Jewish motifs in Benjamin's and Adorno's writing, and on the other, their disappearance from most discussions of social and political philosophy today, or one could say their supersession by third-generation (more practically oriented) critical theorists, let alone Marxist spite against Adorno, I must first weave together some sociology and philosophy, which is not entirely out of place when writing about members of the Institute for Social Research. Before proceeding, I must be emphatic that I am referring to Jewish thought/philosophy rather than popular Hasidic and other like ecstatic movements, all of which are heavily influenced by Christian millenarian movements, as Scholem's works painstakingly make evident. These are charismatic, anti-intellectual, and, above all, mimetic, that is, anathema both to Jewish thought and to Benjamin's and Adorno's. It is also worth noting, before proceeding, that as early as 1917, Walter Benjamin underlines the differences between Judaism and Christianity in a letter to Scholem.³⁴ Ironically, I would like to suggest that it is precisely because of their assimilation into a Christo-Platonic idiom that the political nature of the Jewish influences on Benjamin's and Adorno's thought is thoroughly occluded.

In "The Integrity of the Intellectual: In Memory of Walter Benjamin,"³⁵ Leo Löwenthal traces back to Marx the interplay among the three motifs constitutive of Benjamin's concern with history and justice, the political, messianic, and Jewish elements also found in Bloch's, Marcuse's, Horkheimer's, his own, and I

³⁴ Benjamin, *Correspondence*, October 22, 1917.

³⁵ Löwenthal, "Integrity of the Intellectual."

would add Adorno's thought, quoting Benjamin's notes or par-alipomena to the "Theses on the Concept of History." I can think of no better place to begin the consideration of Marx's influence on Benjamin's thought, Benjamin on Adorno's, than with a lengthy consideration of one par-alipomenon, first because the par-alipomena are largely ignored, second, and more important, because this par-alipomenon provides a lens into the thematic unity to all of Benjamin's writing on politics, history, and violence, at least from 1920 to 1940, as well as sheds light on the affinity with Adorno.³⁶ And, if we keep in mind the origin of par-alipomena in Kepler's optics, which I suggest we do, these notes provide significant prisms to other writings, and especially to the official "Theses" as well as the *Arcades Project*. Understood in this way, the par-alipomena serve a similar role in relation to the "Theses," as do the "Notes" and Sketches" to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and the "Meditations on Metaphysics" to *Negative Dialectics*.

In the idea of a classless society, Marx secularizes the idea of messianic time. And that was a good idea. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an "ideal" that the trouble began. This ideal was defined in Neo-Kantian doctrine as an "infinite task" [*unendlich Aufgabe*]. And this doctrine was the school of philosophy of the Social Democratic Party – from Schmidt and Stadler through Natrop and Völander.³⁷

However stylistically awkward this par-alipomenon or prism is, it is equally disclosive.

The egalitarian nature of the secularized form of messianic time singled out by Benjamin as a good idea is first highlighted by Marx in his *Spinozas Theologische-Politische Tractat* of 1841. What is especially striking about this prism is the dialectical opposition between Marx's Spinozian idea and the Neo-Kantian "ideal." In Spinoza's theologico-political critique of religion, which is also a radical critique of teleology, that

³⁶ This par-alipomenon also provides a prism or lens to the past and to the origin of the classless society in Spinoza's TTP.

³⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4:401.

is, of the future orientation of politics in general, justice, in particular, which Marx underscores, in the Hebrew Commonwealth, the perfect theocracy was the perfect democracy, materially achieved. Viewed in the light of the Spinozist controversy in Germany, and of its concrete material impact on German Jewish thought, let alone Jewish life, the opposition between Marxian and Neo-Kantian history and politics is the opposition between Spinoza and Herman Cohen, the author, *inter alii*, of *Kant's Teleologie und ihre erkenntnistheoretische Bedeutung* (The epistemological significance of Kant's teleology), who was the first to present the "ideal" of knowledge as an infinite task. The extensive political ramifications of this opposition cannot be exaggerated. And, indeed, as will become evident, in the following lines of this prism, Benjamin turns this infinite, metaphysical task upside down, into a finite, that is to say, political one.

Two significant aspects of the specific, concrete conditions of the German Jewish liberal intellectual combine to explode simultaneously the myth of progress evident, on one hand, in the German liberal Neo-Kantian claim to, or really hope for, Jewish emancipation, and, on the other, in the Soviet achievement of a classless, free society. As Leo Löwenthal points out, pace Cohen's insistence on endless progress – really a paraphrase of Kant's insistence against all empirical evidence, on the "continual improvement of the human race" – at the most concrete, political, and institutional level, "Jewish assimilation into the liberal philosophical tradition (with or without socialist bias) was all the more futile since intellectual liberality remained something foreign in Germany."³⁸ At the critical-philosophical level, as Löwenthal notes, "Benjamin, like the rest of us, had to go through the painful process of recovering, theoretically and emotionally, from the disappointment dealt us by the history of the Soviet republic and the communist movement from the mid-twenties on."³⁹ These two aspects of the conditions which German Jewish intellectuals on the Left, especially members of the Institute

³⁸ Löwenthal, "Integrity of the Intellectual," 251.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 256.

for Social Research, had to confront, and because of which they could no longer hold on to any ideological illusion concerning history and freedom, cannot be overemphasized when evaluating not only Benjamin's but also, and importantly, Adorno's and Horkheimer's political commitments, which commitments are attuned to Marx, and to that extent, critical of Marxism, and Marxist cliché once they have become false.⁴⁰ As I argue earlier, the 1969 preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides the most succinct formulation of this. One major motivating thought of this book is that the difference between "idea" and "ideal" is the difference between materialist, historical critique of concrete history and politics, of historical violence and oppressive institutions and their repudiation in the name of future happiness. Succinctly stated, rather than being revolutionary, the endless striving for utopia is thoroughly nihilistic. As Benjamin points out, the state of innocence or the unpolitical natural man is a regressive fiction unmasked by Marx in "On the Jewish Question."

Nowhere in Benjamin's work is Marx's thought on history and politics to be found more frequently, in both citations and mood, than in the *Paralipomena*, even when he misreads Marx. Whereas the critique of the Social Democrats is found in the "official" final version of the "Theses," direct references to Marx are few indeed (three at a stretch). What is at stake, in my view, in Benjamin's and Adorno's critiques is precisely the barbarism at the heart of high, noble-sounding culture, of Humanism (an exemplary cliché) rather than the one opposed to culture, to cite Adorno, the violence constitutive of purportedly liberal or liberating political institutions. Since, for Benjamin, the exemplary representatives of this philosophically and politically are the Social Democrats – for Adorno actionist Marxists – rather than Fascist organizations and institutions, I wish to linger for a while in this paralipomenon or prism, *inter alia*, because the Social

⁴⁰ It is important to note, again, that it is not the ideological appropriation of Marxist idiom that renders them false but rather the fact that the ideology is an insidious mode of covering up, even ameliorating, the changed historical conditions, and changed form of oppression.

Democrats neutralize the masses, ameliorating their suffering, or rather masking it, and thus facilitate their mobilization by the fascists. I postpone discussion of Adorno's critique of actionism to the following chapters. To return to this extraordinary prism:

Once the classless society has been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogenous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity. In reality, there is not a moment that would carry with it *its* revolutionary chance – provided that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new [task] [*Aufgabe*]. For the revolutionary thinker the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation.⁴¹

Once the revolution or restitution becomes the ideal whose origin comes to us from the future, once the concrete possibility of radical change is detached from existing oppressive institutions, it assumes the form of religious consolation, even if in a secular garb, the opium that makes possible equanimity in the face of oppression. For, as Marx points out, the overcoming of oppressive institutions is the condition for a change in forms of consciousness rather than vice versa. As will become evident momentarily, this is the real and radical difference between “enlisting the aid of wizened theology” of the first thesis coupled with a thoroughly a-theological, a-Christian understanding of the messianic and redemption, and any utopian ideal be it social democratic or vulgar Marxist. The orientation to the past is the key to understanding this difference as well as the strange blend of Marx and Judaism in Benjamin's entire oeuvre. It is this uncanny coupling that can throw into sharp relief the historical materialist relation to politics and history. For, if the revolutionary historian's warrant is found in the political situation, her “ground” is history, a

⁴¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4:402. For some inexplicable reason, the translators render the first appearance of *unendlich Aufgabe* by “infinite task,” but the second appearance by “infinite problem.” I changed the translation not merely for pedantic consistency but especially in order to emphasize its practical nature, or rather its relation to praxis. The question of praxis is discussed in detail in the final chapter.

material history diametrically opposed to the philosophy of history. Differently stated, for the revolutionary historian, history is politics, politics, history. The Kantian and neo-Kantian alternatives present and represent an escape from both history and politics. As Benjamin states:

[It] is equally grounded, for this thinker, in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides, *in the strict sense*, with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic. [and Benjamin adds in parentheses] (Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, [finite] [*endlich*] achieved interruption.)⁴²

Uncanny as this last parenthetical sentence may sound to many a Marxist ear, it simultaneously links Benjamin's earlier and later works together and highlights his radical rescue of Marx from Christo-Platonic messianic, idealist or "Marxist" appropriation. Indeed, in a later paragraph, Benjamin repeats the claim that classless society is not or rather should not be the final goal of the historical process – a sentiment whose origin can be traced back to the "Theologico-Political Fragment" – and points out that "from this erroneous conception Marx's epigones have derived . . . the notion of the 'revolutionary situation,' which, as we know, has always refused to arrive."⁴³ And, here, he provides a messianic face to Marx's concept of "a classless society" precisely as the way to advance "the revolutionary politics of the proletariat itself."⁴⁴ The marriage of Marx and Judaism is continuously repeated in all of Benjamin's historical and political writings. In one of the most striking prisms, Benjamin describes Marx's attitude as a historian as a prophetic relation to the future toward which the prophet's back is turned, in other words, as

⁴² Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4:402. My emphasis.

⁴³ *Ibid.* I discuss the "Theologico-Political Fragment" at some length in the final chapter.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:402–3.

the Angel of History of the “Theses,” and asks, “Should criticism and prophecy be the categories that come together in the ‘redemption of the past?’”⁴⁵ Viewed in this light, the historical materialist critic, following Marx, is akin to the Angel of History, and the prophet, whose respective relation to every moment of the present is that of judgment concerning every preceding moment, a day akin to any other day but, which is, nonetheless, Judgment Day. But, perhaps, the most striking of Benjamin’s readings of Marx as a Jew occurs at the end of his essay on Karl Krauss. The end of the Krauss essay brings together Marx and Judaism again in the most political way by means of a citation about human emancipation from the end of “On the Jewish Question,” which Benjamin summons when reflecting on the barbarism of Humanism in general, Weimar “Humanism” in particular. And it is deeply ironic that, following the quotation from “On the Jewish Question,” reflecting on the consignment to oblivion of Krauss’s later political credo, which is a biting condemnation of the “dehumanized brood of owners of property and blood” (*Die Fackel*, November 1920), a critique characterized by Benjamin as the most powerful postwar bourgeois prose, he identifies Kraus’s (and hence Marx’s) Jewish insight that justice is destructive precisely in its opposition to humanist constructions, an insight voiced by Benjamin repeatedly, and in its most Kraus-like biting prose is found in Benjamin’s “Left Wing Melancholy,” a sharp critique of pseudo-radicals, which, according to Löwenthal, was refused publication by *The Frankfurter Zeitung*, a generally liberal paper.⁴⁶ I cannot linger here on this profound irony of the relation between Marx’s most despised work, Kraus’s essay, and Benjamin’s; essay hopefully, I do not need to do so. Before I turn to a brief discussion of the question of the need for help from wizened theology for the sake of political practice in the “Theses,” I want to highlight a unique and peculiar aspect of Benjamin’s dialectics.

⁴⁵ Benjamin, “Dialectical Image,” in *Selected Writings*, 4:407. I return to the “redemption of the past” in [Chapter 5](#).

⁴⁶ Löwenthal, “The Integrity of the Intellectual,” 253.

Benjamin's writings take two mutually constitutive but significantly distinct forms and should be read in the light of both of them; both are expressed in the form of irony, albeit in different ways. On one hand, there is the biting irony of the critique of the late Bourgeois intellectuals, the Neo-Kantians, and the Social Democrats, or forms of reified consciousness reflecting dominant social and political institutions; on the other, there is the Jewish joke, whose master was Kafka (and to a lesser extent Hofmannsthal), as Benjamin notes in "Theological Criticism." This form of writing brings to light a form of consciousness "lost" to progressive history, an alienated form of consciousness, indeed, but far from a reified one, and it is this form of consciousness and its mode of reflecting concrete, historical, oppressive institutions that Benjamin opposed to Humanist progressive history. As he ironically notes in relation to Marx's *Capital* as a form of "history writing," "it is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous than it is to honor the memory of the famous, the celebrated, not excluding poets and thinkers. The historical construction is dedicated to the memory of the anonymous."⁴⁷ Thus understood, the first form of revolutionary history and politics is indeed destructive – it is a form of counterhistorical and political judgment; whereas the latter is constructive insofar as it brings about the only restitution possible for the dead, the restitution to history, or rather historical (as opposed to transcendental) experience, and of remembrance, the foremost concern of both Benjamin and Adorno. For it is this form of restitution that may still make possible critical self-consciousness, the *sine qua non* condition for justice and freedom, in both Benjamin's and Adorno's thought.

Now, I want to emphatically propose that this interruption of the homogenous continuum that unifies the dominant historical narratives of victors, an interruption that crystallizes a unique relation to past moments in Benjamin, or produces a bodily shock in Adorno,⁴⁸ discloses the inseparability of thinking

⁴⁷ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4:406.

⁴⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, "Meditations on Metaphysics," 364.

and practice, or more precisely discloses the active dimension of thinking in both Benjamin's and Adorno's writings. To recall the end of the lengthy prism on which I have been commenting, the revolutionary thinker's relation to a moment of the past, which provides a distinct entry chamber (or unique relation) to a mode of the past opposed to the numbing, complacent, ahistorical and a-political antechamber of the Social Democrats, is an active political, strictly historical (*endlich*), and destructive interruption or political intervention. To repeat: "The entrance into this chamber coincides, *in the strict sense*, with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic. (Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, [finite] [*endlich*] achieved interruption.)" Moreover, Benjamin's extraordinary claim that such an entrance into another chamber, or the explosion of the historical continuum, "coincides, *strictu sensu*, with political action" whose destructive form is messianic, that is, bears the character of a Judgment Day, makes amply evident the extraordinary proximity between Benjamin and Adorno on the relation between theory and praxis, thinking and action, a proximity surprisingly (and, if I am allowed, sadly) absent from Horkheimer's relation to Adorno. I shall return to this at the beginning of the discussion of Adorno on/against resignation, in my view the most important discussion of the relation of theory to practice, precisely because of the Jewish (and I would add materialist Aristotelian) character of the understanding of praxis.

That Benjamin begins the official version of the "Theses on the Concept of History" with a rather troubling, oriental figure reflecting simultaneously orientalist popular current culture, that is, forms of consciousness, and its occluded Christian origins is not surprising, or rather, it is simultaneously a commonplace of German high culture at that time and a shock that enables critiques of Kantian and Hegelian historicism. Clearly a full careful analysis of this Thesis is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead let me highlight what I view as two of its most significant features. First, the stakes of the imaginary game to be won by the historical materialist puppet is past history and its embodiment in present

political institutions. And, as Benjamin points out repeatedly, this game, historically understood rather than imagined, has thus far always been won by the victors. Second, the representation of theology by a hunchback is far from accidental for, according to Benjamin, the hunchback, as well as other distorted figures, is the form that things assume in oblivion.⁴⁹ What is at stake, again and quite precisely, is remembrance. The more the theological nature of the concept of historical progress and its justification of necessity/violence for the sake of future redemption/happiness remains hidden, the greater is its power over the past, the less safe the dead. It is no exaggeration to view this Thesis as a crystallized form of Marx's "On the Jewish Question."

Before I turn to a preliminary discussion of justice and Judgment Day in Adorno's writings on history and politics, and in order to clarify my claim about the Jewish character of Benjamin's and Adorno's understanding of the relation between theory and praxis, one more comment about the real and radical difference between Judaism and Christianity is called for. First and foremost, I must recall and emphasize again the facts that Judaism is an orthopraxy, whereas Christianity is an orthodoxy.⁵⁰ Translated into secular idiom, Judaism is a legal, that is to say, political, system, Christianity, precisely as the repudiation or supersession of Jewish law, is a belief system; Judaism is concerned with social practices, Christianity with individual beliefs. It is Mosaic law that establishes Jewish community; it is doctrine that founds Christianity, as well as lending it a political force.⁵¹ Kant's questions are exemplary precisely insofar as they

⁴⁹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 2:811–12. As will become evident in the following chapters, for both Benjamin and Adorno, the forgotten and discarded, the useless, may harbor within themselves revolutionary possibilities.

⁵⁰ The need to repeatedly emphasize this difference arises from the fact that the indubitable nature of Judaeo-Christianity is a deeply entrenched habit, of very long duration, In this sense it has a deeply entrenched, affective power to repel claims to the contrary.

⁵¹ It is important to recall that the affirmation of the Nicene Creed formulated by the Council of Nicea convened by the emperor Constantine in 325 CE first established Christianity as a unified religion and provides it with political

concern the individual rather than the community. “What can I know? What ought I to do? For what may I hope? What is a human being?” In contrast, the specifically Jewish character of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s thought is best summarized by the two Jewish prohibitions already mentioned several times: the prohibition against preparation for the messianic age, which is at the heart of their critique of teleology, especially the teleological orientation of politics, and the prohibition against graven images, which is at the heart of their (political) critique of mimesis.⁵² And it cannot be overemphasized that these are prohibitions, that is, legal decrees, seeking to regulate social practice. Finally, as Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno point out, Jewish monotheism and its prohibition against graven images is an unprecedented achievement over myth, breaking the spell of magic or the fear of nature, that Christianity could not sustain. And, where there is no fear of nature, there is no fallen nature, nor ontological evil. Good and bad, justice and injustice are *strictu sensu* legal/political categories – an important moment of convergence between Judaism and the non-baptized Aristotle.

Theory and Practice I: First Discussion

ADORNO: But there really is something like dianoetic virtue – devoting oneself to something for the sake of doing it justice.

HORKHEIMER: Practice is implicit in justice.

ADORNO: This brings us to the point where it can be seen that there is something deluded about the separation of theory and practice. Separating these two elements is actually ideology.⁵³

A strange reversal occurs in this even stranger document characterized by the editors of the *New Left Review* as a “philosophical

force. Failure to adhere to the creed resulted not only in excommunication but also in political exile.

⁵² Note the philosophical origin of mimesis as a political question in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, especially in the discussion of the imitation of the affects, primary among which from a political perspective, in addition to hope and fear, are love and hate (attraction and repulsion).

⁵³ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto,” 50.

jam session” (in an amusingly reluctant fashion⁵⁴) and by Adorno as a striving for “a strictly Leninist manifesto.” Horkheimer, originally the more radical Marxist and rigorous philosopher, simultaneously expresses Marxist conservatism and resignation. Whereas Adorno keeps insisting on the political significance of thinking, of critical reflection as possessing a revolutionary potential even in “a world in which we can no longer imagine a better one,” Horkheimer continues to lament the absence of a party. More precisely, whereas against despair, Adorno attempts to retrieve the thought of praxis from its deformation in Marxist jargon, Horkheimer seems unwilling or rather unable to do so, asking “what is the meaning of practice if there is no longer a party? In that case doesn’t practice mean either reformism or quietism?”⁵⁵ and later accuses Adorno of being too much of a university professor and an Aristotelian. While I do not think that the latter accusation is entirely wrong, the form it takes, in this free, improvisational exchange by heretofore masters of such an exchange fully attuned to one another’s tone, is false. For, it is indeed Aristotle for whom theory and practice are inseparable, but not the baptized Aristotle. It is a sad irony that the radical critic of all forms of instrumental reason and of Neo-Positivism, forms of reason that mark the culmination of the separation between theory and practice (subject and object), or more precisely, thinking and human activity, has now succumbed to their separability or to the priority of practice to thinking. In contradistinction, rather than despair, in the absence of a party, that his thinking is futile, Adorno insists on the necessity for more critical thinking for the sake of activity, at times, as activity. Most succinctly stated, critique can be intervention, following Marx’s *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*.⁵⁶ To be sure, I am not doing justice to the

⁵⁴ It is rather amusing that Adorno’s criticism of jazz is cause for disease in the use of a jazz analogy.

⁵⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto,” 52.

⁵⁶ See [Chapter 2](#).

intricacies of Horkheimer's rejection of a thinking not oriented toward social and political change. To do it justice would require a careful analysis of this strange "text" and a critical evaluation of the epistemological status of the theoretical dimension of these back-and-forth exchanges which continue to shift positions and perspectives. Nonetheless, the evidence for Horkheimer's resignation is well documented.⁵⁷

In agreement with Benjamin's thinking on history, for Adorno, critical thinking is a thinking of possibility; this is its revolutionary potential or its utopian moment. And the thinking which is the thinking of possibility not only is not resigned but rather attempts to explode the totalitarian necessity of the present objective conditions, to expose them as unnecessary. Irrespective of one's view of the relation between natural and rational necessity and possibility, one need not be a logician or a metaphysician to insist that the possible is always possible in relation to the necessary; for the contradictory of the necessary is the impossible. Viewed in this light, resignation and actionism exhibit the same relation to necessity and are thoroughly undialectical, lacking precisely the mediating concepts between contradictories. The pessimism characteristic of the former and the utopian optimism of the latter, in fact, accept the inevitability of current oppression, the one despairing of the possibility of change, the other willfully seeking to force it at all costs. In *Minima Moralia*, this dialectical loss or need is presented as an occultist form of the regression of consciousness, a consciousness that "has lost the power to think the unconditional and to endure the conditional. Instead of defining both, in their unity and difference, by conceptual labor, it mixes them indiscriminately. The unconditional becomes *fact*, the conditional an *immediate presence*."⁵⁸ Frozen

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Bernstein, *The Frankfurt School*. The paucity of intellectual activity after the war also speaks louder than words.

⁵⁸ Adorno, "Theses against Occultism," in *Minima Moralia*, Part III, paras. 151, 238. My emphases.

in their undialectical opposition, both “fact” and “immediate presence” become the necessary, the given, the positive.

Benjamin’s profound influence on Adorno’s thinking of history and politics is dispersed throughout Adorno’s works and especially writings posterior to the “Theses,” beginning with *Minima Moralia*. It is in this “melancholy science” which is offered to the absent Horkheimer that another absence is intensely felt, especially in two crystallized fragments or, one could say, prisms, “Bequest” and “Finale,” in the first explicitly, in the second implicitly. The *Bequest* of fragment 98 is Benjamin’s bequest, a bequest at once historical and philosophical, intended to break the spell of necessity, which is nothing other than the philosophical form of the spell of myth and magic. Against Hegelian dialectics, which Adorno here identifies as positive, Adorno proposes that “dialectical thought is an attempt to break through the coercion of logic by its own means”; but, precisely for this reason, dialectics always runs the risk of becoming coercive. In a unique and yet true-to-form manner, Adorno almost immediately turns the logical and methodological or epistemological problem into a political one. The universal that “triumphs over the existing” becomes the “principal economic phases and their development, which each in turn historically shape the *whole* of society . . . That calamity is brought about precisely by the stringency of such development.”⁵⁹ And, here in an astonishing move, Adorno indicts Critical Theory of not being critical or radical enough so as to break the spell of necessity. “That this stringency is itself linked to domination, is, at the least, not made explicit in critical theory, which, like traditional theory, awaits salvation from stage-by-stage progression.”⁶⁰ This is an astonishing accusation and one highly reminiscent of Benjamin’s indictment of the Social Democrats. Critical Theory is not

⁵⁹ Adorno, “Bequest,” in *Minima Moralia*, Part II, para. 98, 151. The emphasis on economic development here clearly puts into question van Reijen’s and Bransen’s claim that Horkheimer and Adorno distanced themselves from advocates of the primacy of economics over politics. In fact, it makes evident that Adorno did not accept the real distinction between them.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

attentive enough to Marx's insistence that methodological questions neither are nor can be independent of the institutions of domination, theory cannot be separated from practice, and, properly understood, vice versa. And it is the task of theory to shatter the totalizing claims to necessity that Adorno presents as the "bourgeois ideals" that determine history and social institutions.

As corrective to the rigid adherence to a dialectics defined by necessity, Adorno offers Benjamin's critique of the concept of history as a bequest of a task that, *inter alia*, redefines dialectics. To Benjamin's claim that history "has hitherto been written by the victors," Adorno adds that knowledge "should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant eccentric, derisory."⁶¹ These unassimilated and inassimilable details or products and anonymous producers lie out of the reach of dominant institutions and may possess possibilities that escape those determined by the necessary laws of official history. It is these forgotten details that theory must address. What appears as trivial, unimportant, discardable to grand, ideal theories and, yes, musical compositions Adorno tells us may contain flashes of otherwise unavailable experience. In this insight lies the revolutionary, "prophetic" power of Benjamin's thought. "Benjamin's writings are an attempt in ever new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has *not yet* been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically."⁶² In the end Benjamin provides the arche for the critical model: for interventions and catchwords that interrupt and redefine both critique and theory. I would like to suggest that the "Notes and Sketches" appended to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid. 151–152. My emphasis.

especially the “Meditations on Metaphysics” at the end of *Negative Dialectics*, present such inassimilable details, details that bring about a unique experience, one could argue, a bodily shock.

The end of *Minima Moralia*, the *Finale*, does not mention Benjamin. It need not since it reads as a tribute to Benjamin in his own voice, or almost. Perhaps, more than any other of Adorno’s writings on Benjamin posthumously, this fragment, or final prism, is arguably also a eulogy or requiem. After Auschwitz, and against despair, Adorno presents the prism of redemption as the singular model for the responsible practice of philosophy. Calling for an impossible possibility, the hope of those without hope, of the little ones without hope, the deformed, discarded, and lost to history, Adorno states, “Perspectives must be fashioned that displace the estranged world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought.”⁶³

The entire fragment should be read as a very serious Jewish joke: in an encapsulated form that will later receive greater detail in “The Meaning of Working through the Past” and “Education after Auschwitz,” the *Finale* speaks of the necessity of thinking the impossible as the only possibility for the redemption of the past or of remembrance of what cannot be re-membered. That this demand to remember what has been repressed, forgotten, or continues to be threatened by oblivion or a second death by grand historical narratives is placed on thought is not surprising. For critical thought harbors the only revolutionary potential “free of willfulness and violence.”

Adorno ends the *Finale* performatively stating that “the more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But, besides the

⁶³ Adorno, “Finale,” in *Minima Moralia*, Part III, para. 153, 247.

demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.”⁶⁴

Against the prevailing models of the possible and impossible, real and unreal, which have thus far been determined by rational necessity or unconditional thought, Adorno proposes conditional thought, or what in “Meditations on Metaphysics” at the end of *Negative Dialectics* he presents as thought thinking against itself; for anything else would be barbaric after Auschwitz. “If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of the victims.”⁶⁵

Theory and Practice II: Against Resignation

Actionism is regressive. Under the spell of the positivity that long ago became part of the armature of ego weakness, it refuses to reflect upon its own impotence.⁶⁶

In addition to “reified consciousness,” which Adorno explicitly identifies as one of the catchwords into which the essays gathered together in *Critical Models* seek to intervene, another catchword can be found in many of them, one that is a symptom of “reified consciousness,” namely, “actionism” (*aktionismus*). By actionism, a catchword “borrowed” from art, Adorno here refers not only to the Viennese 1960s art movement of that name nor only to the “activism” of the student movement in the 1960s but rather to all forms of the separation between theory and praxis that privilege praxis over theory, most of which are in fact hostile to theory, let alone to critical, dialectical thinking. Adorno’s critique of actionism, the pseudo-activity that believes itself to be revolutionary praxis, is an intervention that is at once philosophical and political.

Ironically, it is no exaggeration to claim that, for Adorno, the absence of the party may, in fact, amount to a liberation from a

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Adorno, “Meditations on Metaphysics,” 1, “After Auschwitz,” in *Negative Dialectics*, *Negative Dialectics*.

⁶⁶ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” *Critical Models*, 273.

conformity to collectively enforced doctrine or solidarity with a cause doomed to failure when the conditions for its realization do not materially exist. Worse still, like other forms of revolt, faced with failure, it is susceptible to reactionary usurpation. Solidarity with a doomed cause is not only delusional but it is a delusion that demands the denunciation of critical thinking. Pointless action, “heroic sacrifice,” is, for Adorno, a surrogate for politics, as is an “art” that confuses itself with reality. In a surprising reversal of what elsewhere may appear to be a wholesale rejection of Brecht’s work, Adorno juxtaposes Brecht’s art with actionist art; what characterizes their difference is Brecht’s self-consciousness, a reflective relation to activity that recognizes the real and radical difference between theater and politics and, despite the still unwavering political commitment at the time, admits to a greater interest in theater than in “changing the world.”⁶⁷ And, in a tone at once very serious and humorous, Adorno states, “Such a consciousness would be the best corrective for a theater that today confuses itself with reality, such as the *happenings** now and then staged by the actionists that muddle aesthetic semblance and reality. Whoever does not wish to fall short of Brecht’s voluntary and audacious avowal will suspect most praxis today of lacking talent.”⁶⁸ Humor notwithstanding, it becomes clear that the “lack of talent” is an intellectual or theoretical lack.

Adorno repeatedly returns to the relation between theory and practice against both actionism and positivism, which are often two manifestations of the same “lack,” especially in relation to the appropriations of Marx. Against the reduction to an undifferentiated identity or even a sameness that seamlessly leads from one to the other, Adorno insists on an understanding of the relation of theory and practice as a discontinuous one, whereby neither theory can be reduced to practice, nor practice to theory;

⁶⁷ Adorno’s reference here is to the July 6 entry of Benjamin’s “Conversations with Brecht.,” in which Brecht states that in response to an oft imagined interrogation by a tribunal, he “admits; that he is not fully in earnest because he think(s) too much about artistic problems . . . about what is good for the theater.” Adorno, *Critical Models*, 275n.

⁶⁸ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 275.

neither theory can be put in the service of practice, nor practice be understood as application of theory; either reduction is undialectical and, as such, also ahistorical. In a similar manner, Adorno draws a sharp distinction between Marx and Marxism: “The dogma of the unity of theory and praxis, *contrary to the doctrine on which it is based*, is undialectical; it underhandedly appropriates simple identity where contradiction alone has the chance of becoming productive.”⁶⁹

Once again, for Adorno, the “methodological” question is inseparable from the historical and political question. Although theory arises from and is part of the social process, were it not to some extent independent of the totality, it could not resist “its captivating spell” and hence could not be productive. Marx’s theory of the unity of theory and practice was credible at the moment when the concrete possibility for change seemed imminent. However, as Adorno points out, even then, Marx nowhere expounded “theoretical recipes for praxis” or a “positive description of a classless society.” Once again, in a tone at once serious and humorous, Adorno states, “Every speaker of the ApO who has learned his vocabulary would have to chide that book [*Capital*] for being abstract.”⁷⁰ And, as he points out, even in the few instances in which his own interventions had practical influence, it was because of theory rather than in opposition to theory or by putting theory in the *service of* practice. Adorno’s interventions are interventions into ideology, that is, the public face of false consciousness, whose dissolution has practical consequences. Or, as Adorno points out at the end of “Critique,” explicitly paraphrasing Spinoza, “the false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index for what is right and better.”

In all the essays pertaining to the relation of theory to praxis, Adorno repeatedly insists on thinking as a source of resistance. This insistence is intensified in “Resignation,” Adorno’s explicit response to the accusation that the older generation of the Frankfurt School, who developed Critical Theory, was not courageous

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 277. My emphasis.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

enough to draw practical conclusion from it. In response Adorno does not deny the “subjective” element of preferring theory, in a manner similar to Brecht’s preference for art; however, he is simultaneously emphatic about the greater importance of the objective element, that is, the concrete possibility for change. In a brilliant dialectical reversal, Adorno turns the “psychological” table or subjective element upside down, pointing out that the hostility to all thinking that is not immediately practical expressed by advocates of action for action’s sake in fact marks a wound originating in an anxiety of which they are aware that thought might be right – a conscious thought, but not a self-conscious, that is, reflective or critical thought.⁷¹ Insofar as it is *critical* thought that exposes negativity, anxiety turns into rage against thought. However, no amount of pseudo-activity can change pseudo-reality: pseudo in the double sense of negative and false, or what Spinoza names the sanctuary of ignorance. In safeguarding pseudo-reality from critique, pseudo-action ironically serves to sustain the oppressive conditions, becomes complicit in them. But, as Adorno repeatedly points out, “only thinking could find an exit, and moreover a thinking whose results are not stipulated.”⁷² The “leap” into praxis not only does not safeguard against resignation but also may serve to propel toward it insofar as, without thought, pseudo-action is bound to fail. In short, it is only thought that refuses to accept the current situation as necessary, let alone final, that can explode its necessity.

Insofar as no better form of society was and is concretely, materially possible in 1969, let alone now, any form of action is a form of regression. Following Freud, Adorno points out that on the subjective side, regression does not reach the instinctual aims;

⁷¹ The origin of this psychological insight in Spinoza cannot be overemphasized, especially since it is at the core of his critique of religion, in general, teleology, in particular. I return to the critique of teleology in the following chapters. To recall, addressing the two fundamental prejudices that have turned into superstition, teleology and free will, as early as the Appendix to *Ethics* I, Spinoza points out that humans believe themselves to be free because they are conscious of their appetites but ignorant of the causes of their appetite.

⁷² Adorno, “Resignation,” in *Critical Models*, 291.

on the objective side, it is renunciation. To the regressive personality, Adorno juxtaposes the “uncompromising critical thinker, who neither signs over his consciousness nor lets himself be terrorized into action, is in truth the one who does not give in.”⁷³ In a final and complete reversal of the accusation that he has resigned, Adorno turns critical thinking into a political weapon against resignation. The thinking of possibility against the absolute necessity of what exists, the utopian moment in thinking, is the most powerful weapon against both resignation and utopianism. “The utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it – this too a form of relapse – objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization.” Not only is the thinking of possibility an a-teleological thinking form of praxis but also, and more important, it is “more akin to transformative praxis” precisely because it is not *for the sake* of praxis. Thinking, for Adorno, is a sublimation of rage, both that directed against oneself and that directed at another. Confirming Horkheimer’s “accusation,” Adorno ends his indictment of Actionism on an Aristotelian and Spinozian note:

The happiness that dawns in the eye of the thinking person is the happiness of humanity. The universal tendency of oppression is opposed to thought as such. Thought is happiness even where it defines unhappiness: by enunciating it. By this alone happiness reaches into the universal unhappiness. Whoever does not let it atrophy has not resigned.⁷⁴

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 293.

Destitute Life and the Overcoming of Idolatry

Dialectical Image, Archaic Fetish in Benjamin's and Adorno's Conversation

Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in sky above or in the earth below, or in the water under the earth.

– Exodus 20:4

Introduction

The teleology explicitly acknowledged or implicit in the denunciations of Adorno as a resigned mandarin, unconcerned with practice, or a pessimist incapable of providing a positive philosophical or normative direction to social science, exemplary of Habermas's critique, requires either that the contemporary world has overcome magic and fetishism, that is, has finally overcome idolatry and, with it, religion *as a need*, or that it has reconciled nature and history. At the very least this suggestion would imply that the contemporary world provides the material conditions for meaningful striving for such achievement of reconciliation at the end of history. Even in his more recent, "postsecular" writings, which recognize the resilience, indeed impermeability, of religion to all rational critique as well as its persistence in the public sphere, Habermas continues to base his analyses on a view of religion that is thoroughly Christian to the same extent that he argues, uncritically or nondialectically, that the origin

and strength of the public sphere – and hence communicative rationality – derive from religion. As Fred Dallmayer succinctly notes, Habermas’s accommodation of religion both requires that it obey the timeless dictates of universal pragmatics and is an accommodation that is resigned to global, neoliberal capitalist society as it exists today.¹

Rather than repeat my criticism of Habermas’s (mis) understanding of Jewish thought in the previous chapter, in these introductory comments, suffice it to point out that the essays devoted to German Jewish thought in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity* – the majority of the essays in this volume – exhibit the same shortcomings as the ones previously criticized, namely, they read Jewish thought through a thoroughly Christian lens, even in its secular Enlightenment garb.

Against the dual background of actionist teleology that insists that the overcoming of religion is really possible and a teleology that nonetheless accepts the necessity/inevitability of the status quo, in this chapter I examine the fate of images and things in a “demystified world,” indeed the material (concrete and historical) possibility of demystification, in light of the following insight from Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, cited by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*: “I can, in practice, relate myself humanly to an object only if the object relates itself humanly to man.”² This examination is motivated, first and foremost, by the exceptionally fecund dialectical tension between some of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s reflections on art/living and history evident in the epistolary exchange between them from 1935 to 1940. Insofar as some of these exchanges offer exemplary manifestations of “misreadings” by those who share a deep philosophical as well as political commitment to demystification, they make all the more evident the (almost) impossible nature

¹ In his online essay reviewing *Religion and Rationality*, Eduardo Mendieta’s collection of Habermas’s essays, Dallmayer is as critical of Mendieta as he is of Habermas, especially of Mendieta’s claim that there is no real difference between first- and second-generation Frankfurt School.

² Benjamin, “The Collector,” in *Arcades Project*, 209.

of the commitment to demystify. At the same time, insofar as this commitment is motivated by a confrontation with the overwhelming power of magic over the masses, whose resurgence both Benjamin and Adorno witnessed at the time, their writings and critical exchanges about mystified/reified art “objects” are forms of resistance to despair or resignation even in the most desperate times.³ For, as Adorno will later note in the Finale to *Minima Moralia*, it is for the sake of the possible that thought must comprehend its own impossibility.⁴ And, as I argued in the previous chapter, this Finale makes amply evident Benjamin’s extensive and intensive influence on Adorno’s thought, an influence that became more self-aware as the correspondence about Baudelaire and *The Arcades Project* unfolded, and even more urgent posthumously to Benjamin’s untimely death.

I start the chapter with the absolute prohibition against graven images since it simultaneously marks the achievement of Mosaic monotheism and its impossibility. If this Mosaic prohibition is the arche of monotheism, the later Jewish prohibition against preparation for the messianic age, that is, against the future orientation of human action, is its political expression. It is not surprising, therefore, that every political encounter with despair witnessed and continues to witness the return of both idolatry and messianic fervor, albeit in different ways, reflecting the changed concrete historical conditions of their emergence.⁵ But, whereas the idolatry characteristic of pre-Enlightenment catastrophes led to the production of divine idols, to new relations to god/s,

³ A striking example of this is found in a letter dated February 1, 1939, in which Adorno first apologetically explains the long delay in responding to Benjamin’s previous letter by the dire situation befalling his parents in Germany, including the imprisonment of both parents and injury to his father’s eye during a pogrom. Nevertheless, following the apology and a brief commentary about the crisis situation in Europe, Adorno proceeds to a lengthy discussion of Benjamin’s work on *The Arcades Project*.

⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Finale.

⁵ The current political situation in the Middle East is exemplary: whereas the “liberal West” celebrated the demise of oppressive tyrants brought about in no small measure by the global technological achievement of Capitalism, different extremist Islamist movements, seeking to establish theocratic regimes, or in some cases a single Islamic theocracy, continue to be the most unifying “postrevolutionary” force.

the Modern expulsion of the divine from view was anything but a new form of the prohibition; rather, it led to the divinization of the human and to a new form of mastery over nature. Rather than overcoming the fear of nature, or magic, secular history became the arena of its continuous displacement or repression. And, it is the overarching premise of this chapter that both Benjamin's and Adorno's response to the human-made apocalypse was a relentless insistence on this double prohibition as a source of a critical resistance to despair as well as political resignation. Ironically, however, whereas the double Jewish prohibition makes amply evident the inseparability between image and history/politics, not only does the Enlightenment demand their radical separation but also, in philosophy, this separation takes the form of the separation of aesthetics and politics. And, in the early epistolary exchange, Adorno's responses to Benjamin repeatedly emphasize what in his view are uncritical ahistorical, that is, historicist, moments in Benjamin's work, moments that betray his radical, materialist insights about image, politics, and history. In the light of Adorno's later writings on history and politics, writings of which the two fragments from *Minima Moralia* discussed in the previous chapter are exemplary, as well as in the later letters, Adorno's judgment of Benjamin's writing on Baudelaire, judgments that became the standard for the interpretation of the relation between Benjamin's and Adorno's thought, as well as attempts to "rescue" Benjamin's thought, will clearly require a reevaluation.

Brief Excursus: *Habent Sua Fata Auctores*

An uncanny similarity is found between the respective fates of Spinoza's and Benjamin's afterlife – both thinkers have been simultaneously placed at the outer margins of philosophy and on an altar, both are simultaneously villains and idols. In both cases the idolatry is evident in posthumous rivalries.⁶ In Benjamin's case it begins rather early in the barely veiled acrimonious rivalry

⁶ And recall that both Spinoza and Benjamin have often been appropriated into a "mystical tradition."

over not only the interpretation of his work but also the “construction” of his image for posterity by his friends, Adorno and Scholem, as well as Arendt and Habermas, and culminates in writings such as *Benjamin for Beginners*, *Benjamin’s Crossing*, and other popular caricatures of Benjamin for pseudo-intellectuals. Even if we forgo reflection about the irony of Benjamin’s assimilation into popular culture, it is important to note that unlike academic and political rivalries among disciples, for example, left and right Hegelians, many different Marxists, those surrounding Benjamin, do not pertain to discipleship simpliciter. Rather, the “figure or image” of Benjamin is the site of disputes between competing, fully formed intellectual commitments. It is as if posthumously each of these thinkers seeks to proclaim Benjamin’s singular intellectual friendship, which friendship thereby constitutes endorsement or reverse discipleship. Succinctly stated, theirs is the envy of the lovers of a shamelessly promiscuous man, a collector.⁷ And indeed, as is noted by Adorno (and is repeated by Habermas), Benjamin kept his friends apart but did not conceal them from each other. Ironically, the claim to singular friendship has also led to an attempt to bring a certain systematic coherence to Benjamin’s thought, if only through a claim to a progressive development. Thus, Adorno explains away Benjamin’s repudiation of such a view of his work: “out of an aversion to the clichés of the human sciences, Benjamin rejected the idea that there had been any development in his work but the difference between his first letters to Scholem and all the previous ones, as well as the trajectory of the *oeuvre* itself, demonstrates how much he did in fact develop.”⁸ Even if Adorno’s claim here is about an early development away from Benjamin’s involvement with the Youth Movement and attraction to Neo-Kantian philosophy, I would like to suggest that the claim to development here is of a piece with the claim to exclusive friendship, an almost

⁷ The profession of love in many of the letters among Walter, Teddie, and Felicitas is both explicit and, at times, unseemly from the perspective of bourgeois sensibility. Karl Djerassi’s book *Foreplay* is an exemplary lascivious exploitation of this bourgeois sensibility.

⁸ Adorno, “Benjamin the Letter Writer,” in Smith, *On Walter Benjamin*, 335.

desperate melancholic (or even narcissistic) claim. Viewed in this light, the exclusive, retroactive construction of Benjamin's discipleship, transfigures his writings into fetish commodities of a peculiar kind, ones without exchange value, although not necessarily without use value.

In the preceding chapters I argued extensively against radical breaks between periods in thinkers' works and will not repeat these arguments here. Instead, I want to turn directly to the tensions between Benjamin and Adorno on the work of art and the fetish and their political dimension. Again, I privilege Adorno's *apparent* early misreading precisely because of Benjamin's and Adorno's shared commitment to demystification following Marx as well as his recognition of the resistance of Benjamin's works to traditional philosophical appropriation. This posthumously recognized and acknowledged resistance is of a piece with Adorno's recognition in the fragment entitled "Bequest" of Benjamin's "avant-garde," even prophetic status in the context of the critical dimension of Critical Theory discussed in the previous chapter. In an explicit, even if indirect, recognition of his own early failure, Adorno states, "Benjamin's philosophy invites misreading."⁹

In the light of Adorno's emphasis on the near-inevitability of misreading Benjamin (and, if I may add retrospectively, Adorno), I want to refine or provide a philosophical "justification" for orienting my analyses of Adorno's readings, perhaps misreading of Benjamin's 1935 draft of the exposé on Baudelaire by their correspondence on the fate of art or, more precisely, human life in a reified/mortified world. Above all, despite the fact that the nineteenth century and late capitalism form the landscape of their conversation, I want to insist that their deep shared commitment to demystification is situated quite precisely in the politics of the 1930s, of mass mystification and idolatry. Moreover, I want to suggest that the letters can shed light on their subsequent work and the manner in which this philosophical dialogue influenced their subsequent thought. Given that the correspondence is not

⁹ Adorno, "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*," in Smith, *On Walter Benjamin*.

constrained by the formal demands of public works, it enables me to bring into sharper relief Benjamin's and Adorno's understanding of the fate of art not only or simply in late capitalism or the age of commodity fetishism but also, and more important, as the site where the collusion between fetishism and barbarism (vulgar Marxism/Stalinism and fascism) is made visible. But, precisely for this reason, precisely where the artwork (and other human-made or -produced collectible objects) becomes the emblematic fetish, the exemplary mystified commodity, it is also the site where the liberation from the spell might occur and, with it, perhaps, also the liberation of the human world from "alien," useful things. It is not surprising, therefore, that Adorno cites Benjamin's saying "I'm not interested in people, I'm interested only in things,"¹⁰ the inverse and intensified echo of Marx's claim "I can, in practice, relate myself humanly to an object only if the object relates itself humanly to man," cited by Benjamin himself in *The Arcades Project* and recited as the insightful motivation of this chapter.

Succinctly and precisely stated, these letters are the literary un-fetish. In the letters, Adorno talks *to* Benjamin in the most intimate way, framing his critical response as a conversation initially between Herr Benjamin and Herr Wiesengrund and, following Adorno's visit to Paris in 1936, among Walter, Teddie, and Felizitas, whereas in the essays, even those intended to introduce Benjamin's works and emphasizing their multiply allusive nature, he talks *about* Benjamin. Whereas the former is a conversation between subjects, the latter cannot be and thus always runs the risk of reification and mystification. For, even if these essays are motivated by a personal commitment to making Benjamin's work public, it is precisely their publicity that imposes the constraint of literary convention, at least to some extent. They are not personal addresses specifically located in place and time, they do not indicate their transitory vulnerability or the imminent threat under which they are written. They are also posthumous, written after the threat has been realized.

¹⁰ Adorno, "Benjamin the Letter Writer," 333.

If idolatry can befall the written word, be it biblical, literary, or philosophical, which it clearly can and does, then, short of personal conversation, letters offer the strongest resistance to such a destiny. That this resistance is limited is ironically evident in the fate of Adorno's letter to Benjamin dated August 2, 1935, once it has become public, that is, once the letter lost its dialectical flexibility and fecundity. That Adorno is concerned with the form of writing, that he views philosophical engagements between "different intellectual temperaments"¹¹ the fecund place for dialectical or critical thinking, is especially evident in *Minima Moralia* and the contemporaneous preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which explicitly highlights the complicity of conceptual language, systematic science, and ideology.

In reflecting on its own guilt, therefore, thought finds itself deprived not only of the affirmative reference to science and everyday phenomena but also of the conceptual language of opposition. No terms are available which do not tend toward complicity with the prevailing intellectual trends and what threadbare language cannot achieve on its own is precisely made good by the social machinery.¹²

In this light, fragments and fragmentary writing can be seen as the closest public philosophical approximation to letter writing. But this is also what makes them simultaneously resistant to appropriation and subject to indefinite misreadings. Moreover, Adorno explicitly identifies letters as one of Benjamin's literary forms. "Benjamin was a great letter writer, and obviously he wrote with passion," a mediated or mediating passion that simulates life or human experience in the medium of the petrified world.¹³ Thus, clearly, a critical exchange between friends in letters, where the critical response is invited in private, cannot be read in the same way as a critical essay. Why, then, are some of Adorno's letters in response to Benjamin on the works of art the site of such crude readings, an exemplary instance of which

¹¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, preface to the new edition (1969), xi.

¹² Adorno, *Ibid.*, xv.

¹³ Adorno, "Benjamin the Letter Writer," 330–31.

is offered by Habermas, as unlikely a *philosophical* defender of Benjamin against Adorno as can be imagined?¹⁴

Part I. Dialectical Image

Only dialectical images are genuinely historical, that is, not archaic, images.¹⁵

No concept is more germane to Benjamin's historical, literary writings than that of the "dialectical image," no concept more thoroughly commented on and disputed. It is not surprising, therefore, that the "dialectical image" is also the philosophical focus of the correspondence between Benjamin and Adorno from 1935 on. I shall postpone consideration of some of these comments and disputes to the latter part of the chapter since I want to distinguish to the extent possible Adorno's "misreadings" from later ones, many of which originate in "kabbalist" interpretations of Benjamin, which I already questioned in the preceding chapters but to which I shall return.

Nowhere, in my view, is the simultaneity of commitment to, and fragility of communication between Benjamin and Adorno more evident than in the figure of the dialectical image as the historical/material destruction of the archaic image and the constellation of concepts surrounding it, where at stake are both dialectics and image. But, nowhere is the difference between their intellectual temperaments more evident either. That Adorno begins his response to Benjamin's exposé on Baudelaire with praise is no polite or stylistic concession. The tone of the letter is too urgent and personal for tact.¹⁶ As becomes evident upon reading the critical response, Adorno's choice of the most important ideas

¹⁴ Still, it must be admitted that Habermas's re-presentation of Benjamin against Adorno is not only gleefully and unabashedly malicious but also, at times, very funny, almost approximating a Grimm fairy tale.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [N3, 1], 463.

¹⁶ For Adorno on "tact," see "On the Dialectic of Tact," in *Minima Moralia*, 35–37. That tact has no place in an intimate conversation between friends is amply evident in some of the most biting comments both Benjamin and Adorno direct at other philosophers, including close associates.

found in the work is no accident nor reducible to the aesthetic beauty of the writing also highlighted in the opening paragraph; in fact, these are carefully selected in symmetry with the three concepts/ideas that he subjects to radical criticism. "Among these I would particularly like to emphasize the magnificent passage about living as a leaving of traces, the definitive remark about the collector, the liberation of things from the curse of utility, and the dialectical interpretation of Huassmann."¹⁷ These are juxtaposed to the "prehistory of the nineteenth century," the "dialectical image," and the "configuration of myth and modernism."¹⁸ I wish to propose that, for Adorno, the two constellations of ideas represent what he takes to embody an irreducible dialectical tension in Benjamin's own work between a materialist and an idealist dialectic or, which is the same, a Romantic resistance to historical materialism and a Marxist attraction to it. Understood in this light, Adorno reads Benjamin here to inhabit the place of Benjamin's angel of history or prophet, rather than of Kafka's beggar.¹⁹

Although initially it may appear that Adorno's critique is first and foremost methodological, that is, that the question of dialectics is a question of method understood formally, he forestalls such an interpretation, stating that his critique will forgo the distinction between material and epistemological questions in accord with the "philosophical core" of Benjamin's exposé, if not with its external organization, "whose movement is intended to eliminate the antithesis between the two (as in both of the more recent traditional sketches of the dialectic)."²⁰ Form

¹⁷ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, Letter 39 (August 2–4, 1935), 104. There are significant differences between this version of this letter and the version that appeared in *Aesthetics and Politics*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 104–5.

¹⁹ Compare the discussion of the Paralipomena in the preceding chapter. The difference between the grammatical mood of each comportment is significant: the Angel's impotence as well as the prophetic future are expressions of despairing hope, whereas the beggar's contrary to fact subjunctive ironically exchanges the wish for its fulfillment, i.e., expresses the hope of those without hope in future restitution *ad integrum*.

²⁰ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, Letter 39, 104–5.

notwithstanding, the undoing of the assumed distinction between material and epistemological questions is, for Adorno, one of the strength of Benjamin's work, for this purported antithesis is undialectical and represents the false unmediated dichotomy between concrete history and unconditional knowledge or, in their modern forms, empiricism/Idealism or positivism/nominalism.

Focusing upon the single phrase "*Chaque époque rêve le suivante*" (Every epoch *dreams* the succeeding one), Adorno argues that it represents the undialectical core of, and threat to, all the elements central to Benjamin's theory of the "dialectical image," an unmediated dimension that not only obscures the theory but in fact compromises Benjamin's contribution to historical materialism, namely, the unmasking of the theological origin of teleology, in its idealist or materialist, that is, vulgar Marxist, form, a contribution whose importance Adorno repeatedly emphasizes in the "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*" as well, describing it as "the rescue of theology through its secularization."²¹ Uncanny as it may appear, it is not unwarranted to describe Adorno's parsing of this sentence as a "parody of philology," a term he informs us in the "Introduction" essay that Benjamin sometimes used to describe his own method and one that Adorno views as originating in the "tradition of Jewish, and particularly mystical biblical interpretation."²² And, I wish to suggest that Adorno's reference to Jewish biblical hermeneutics is to be understood, following the medieval commentary tradition, as the liberation of books from prejudice or, more precisely following Maimonides, as the eradication of idolatry – here the liberation of objects from use value and hence clearly also from bourgeois exchange value. Moreover, a careful reading of Adorno's minute reading of this phrase – which I shamelessly imitate – discloses the radical difference between two conceptions of dialectics, a historicist and a historical materialist one. According to Adorno, "the proposition [*chaques époque rêve le suivante*] seems to imply three things: a conception of the dialectical image as if it were a content of some

²¹ Smith, *On Walter Benjamin*, 9.

²² *Ibid.*

consciousness, albeit a collective consciousness; its direct – and I would almost say developmental – relation to the future as utopia; and the idea of the ‘epoch’ as a proper, self-contained subject of this objective consciousness.”²³ Most important, insofar as Adorno describes this version of the dialectical image as immanent, it is clear that, for Adorno, immanence here is a transcendental, theological category, for which the contradiction between immanence and transcendence is absolute or ontological rather than social and historical.²⁴ As the dream content of consciousness, the dialectical image appears as if it were free of the magic spell and becomes sociable, thereby losing its objective force, that is, its material possibility of freedom from magic. That is, the claim of immanence here is immanence to consciousness, or to the sovereign subject who is the source of intelligibility, and hence exercises full sovereignty over the boundary between dream and wakeful states, or clear determination of the rationality of the real. Against this idealist Hegelian view of dialectics (and its rationalist Cartesian origins), against the contradiction between subject and object whose overcoming is the reconciliation of the real and rational by the rational, Adorno argues, “[t]he fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather, it is dialectical in character, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness. But, if so, then neither consciousness nor unconsciousness can simply replicate it as a dream, but must respond to it rather with *desire and fear* in equal measure.”²⁵ That is, properly understood, the fetish character of the commodity is the embodied political site of pleasure and pain, or hope and fear, the theologico-political passions par excellence. It is also the place where the power of magic and idols over the masses is most dangerous.²⁶

²³ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, Letter 39, 105.

²⁴ This critique should alert us to exercise great caution when ascribing immanence to Adorno’s form of critique. I return to this problem later on in the chapter.

²⁵ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, Letter 39, 105. My emphasis.

²⁶ Compare the discussion of Spinoza’s TTP in [Chapter 2](#).

It is simultaneously significant and poignantly ironic that it is on the relation between the dialectical image and “fact of consciousness” that Habermas attempts to defend Benjamin against Adorno by appropriating his work into his own and depriving it of any implication for political action that he views instrumentally here.²⁷ Since it is my claim that Adorno’s kinship with Benjamin, their shared striving to destroy idols or uphold the double Jewish prohibition against idolatry and messianism, is thoroughly political, where politics is understood materially, historically, concretely, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider Habermas’s rescuing efforts, a rescue that, in my view, strips Benjamin’s thought not only of its political edge but also of its critical one. This is not merely a strange rescue but a damning one to a Marxian political philosopher – a rescue by neutralization.²⁸ For, again, what is at stake is dialectics or/as critical intervention. Presenting Adorno’s objection to Benjamin as a claim of ideology critique, Habermas argues that “Benjamin has no need to take up this claim of ideology critique; he does not want to reach behind the formations of consciousness to the *objectivity* of an evaluation process by means of which the commodity as fetish gains *power* over the consciousness of individuals. Benjamin wants and needs to investigate only the mode of apprehension of the fetish character in the collective consciousness, because dialectical images are phenomena of consciousness and not (as Adorno thought) transposed into consciousness.”²⁹ In order to argue that Benjamin’s critical approach is not ideology

²⁷ This is doubly ironic given Habermas’s critique of Adorno’s rejection of the possibility of a philosophical reconstruction (one may say rescue) of the social sciences or of the normative potential of reason.

²⁸ Habermas’s description of his initial response to Benjamin’s writings is telling and deliberately ignores (as well as implicitly denies) the political, Marxian importance. “Ute and I immersed ourselves in the dark shimmering essays and in a peculiar way we were moved by the *opaque connection of lucid sentences and apocryphal allusions*, which did not seem to fit any genre.” Habermas, “Dual Layered Time,” 2. My emphasis.

²⁹ Habermas, “Walter Benjamin,” in Smith, *On Walter Benjamin*, 116. My emphases.

critique but *rettende* or rescuing critique, Habermas has to add immediately, “[o]f course, Benjamin also *deceived himself* about the difference between his manner of proceeding and the Marxist critique of ideology.”³⁰ Against Adorno, Habermas seeks to rescue not only critique but also Benjamin’s thought through a theory of linguistic communication that (with some significant modifications), according to him, will bring Benjamin’s “insights back into a materialist theory of social evolution.”³¹ It will also explicitly deprive it of *power*. In short, Habermas’s rescue reinstates the contradiction between materialist and epistemological dialectics, subject and object, theory and practice.³² This is, indeed, a high price, in my view too high a price, to pay by a philosopher whose intense interest in power/violence can be said to constitute the continuity and consistency of his work from the “Critique of Violence” in 1920–21 to the “Theses” in 1940,³³ and who distilled Kafka’s genius and beauty (even if a failed one) as the willingness to sacrifice truth for the sake of transmissibility, undermining the distinction, let alone contradiction, between epistemology and history/politics as well as identifying

³⁰ *Ibid.* My emphasis. And, I must add, “wow!” This is of a piece with Habermas’s claim about Adorno’s secret hope discussed in [Chapter 3](#).

³¹ Habermas, “Walter Benjamin,” 124.

³² Habermas’s relation to, or intellectual competition with Adorno is worthy of a psychoanalytic study. Here, suffice it to remark that Habermas also identifies his own project as a continuation of Horkheimer’s in opposition to Adorno. As the editors of *On Max Horkheimer* remark in an introductory note, “[t]his is all the more remarkable since for biographical reasons Habermas might have been expected to look to Adorno rather than to Horkheimer: whereas Horkheimer rejected his aspirations for a *Habilitation*, Adorno took up his cause and helped to arrange his *Habilitation* at Marburg with Wolfgang Abendroth.” Benhabib et al., *On Max Horkheimer*, 22n39. It is worth noting that the prohibition against harming a benefactor is one of the seven Noahide laws, the minimal conditions for human sociability, according to the Talmud and Maimonides.

³³ As I argued in [Chapter 3](#), irrespective of how we read Benjamin, it cannot be denied that the concern with force/power, as that with the critique of teleology, in all their guises, especially in relation to nature and history, are central to his work from its quasi-fascist to its dogmatic Marxist determinations.

the idea of progress with catastrophe.³⁴ Moreover, to claim that the dialectical image is a fact of consciousness rather than arising from, and expressing, concrete, material, and historically specific bodily events is not only undialectical but also ahistorical or extrahistorical in the face of Benjamin's insistence on its thoroughly historical nature cited earlier.

Yet, Habermas's rescue is not mere violence; his misreading is invited by Benjamin. In fact, Adorno's epistolary response to Benjamin can be said to anticipate such misreading. As will become evident, the several misreadings characterizing the correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin (but also evident in Habermas's rescue of Benjamin from this correspondence) arise from what *appears to be* significant differences in their understanding and deployment of dialectics. That is why, as will become evident from the consideration of several letters, Adorno's persistent "immanent," or, more precisely, materialist, critiques are focused on ahistorical or historicist lapses in Benjamin's work on art, politics, and history, precisely because the question of dialectics for both Adorno and Benjamin is a question of the orientation of history and politics. To transpose the dialectical image into consciousness is to lose sight of the "dialectical power of the fetish character . . . in replica realism . . . of your [Benjamin's] current immanent version of replica realism."³⁵ Were the dialectical image a fact of collective consciousness, the utopian spell of the commodity world could never be broken and catastrophe would be inevitable, that is, necessary and justified – or given meaning, at least epistemologically. In response to these undialectical tendencies both in their Romantic and in their Brechtian garbs, Adorno deploys Benjamin against himself, juxtaposing the immanent version of the dialectical image to its conception as a model. What is in question for Adorno is not the immanence to consciousness in the nineteenth century, nor the dialectical

³⁴ Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [N9a, 1], 473; see also Benjamin, "Theses on the Concept of History," Thesis IX, in *Selected Writings*, 4:392.

³⁵ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, Letter 39, 105.

image per se, but rather what such immanence re-presents or distorts in the nineteenth century, namely, alienation. To locate the dialectical image in the collective consciousness is to occlude the alienated isolation of the bourgeois individual subject. Robbed of its objective origin in the commodity world, the dialectical image regresses into an archaic image. And, as the form of nineteenth-century interiority, such an unmediated image represents the collapse of history into the utopian myth of the ur-classless society in a Golden Age transposed into future possibility. The hypostasized archaic image that displaces the dialectical image results indeed in a dreaming collective where there is no difference between classes, a hallucination that robs even the dream of any political force, a surrealist dream, perhaps, but one that erases the difference between dream and nightmare or condemns the present to hell for the sake of future Utopia. It is no exaggeration, therefore, to claim that in the figure of the dialectical image coalesce the most urgent political concerns – whether its disenchantment is understood psychologically or politically. For Adorno, the idea of a collective consciousness

was invented only to divert attention from true objectivity and its correlate, alienated subjectivity. It is up to us to polarize and dissolve this consciousness dialectically between society and singularities and not to galvanize it as an imagistic correlate of the commodity character. The fact that such a dreaming collective *serves to erase the differences between classes* should already act as a clear and sufficient warning in this respect.³⁶

Both here and in subsequent letters, Adorno repeatedly “begs” for more mediation rather than galvanized opposition, let alone elimination of one of the pair of contraries.³⁷

Adorno’s Benjamin bears close resemblance to Benjamin’s Kafka: his greatest strength is his greatest weakness. Even if the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 107. My emphasis.

³⁷ It is worth noting that in the *Philosophy of New Music* (a text that to recall Adorno describes as the third excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), Adorno may be understood to follow a dialectical “method” similar to Benjamin’s when he describes his procedure as a “dialectic between extremes.” I discuss the *Philosophy of New Music* in the following chapter.

claim to interest in things rather than people is read to mean that only through establishing a human relation to things, the first step of which is freeing them from their use value, can one establish a humane relation to other humans, Adorno's Benjamin gets lost among things, the forlorn survivors often discarded, without purpose, setting them into new constellations, expecting them to announce different relations to the oppressed human world.³⁸ However brilliant the juxtapositions of the destitute human world and fetishized commodities are, without an articulation of their concrete historical and political mediation, the presentation of their oppositional relation runs the risk of becoming absolute. Viewed in this light, Benjamin's theoretical asceticism betrays his greatest theoretical insight, namely, the dialectical image as the concrete historical mediating concept par excellence. In the urban architecture and literature of the nineteenth century, to understand the commodity as a dialectical image is to see it as both supersession of the commodity and its regression. As Adorno carefully brings into relief the carefully mediated materialist or historical force of Benjamin's own elaboration of the dialectical image, he states, "[o]n the one hand, the commodity is an alien object in which use value perishes, and on the other, it is an alien survivor that outlives its own immediacy. It is through commodities, and not directly in relation to human beings, that we receive the promise of immortality."³⁹ Furthermore, Adorno reinstitutes the proximity between Benjamin's Baroque book and *The Arcades Project*, arguing, following Benjamin, that the fetish as the "faithless" image of the nineteenth century can be rightly viewed as the death head and identifies Kafka's Odradek as one such purposeless commodity. It is this political insight that Adorno continuously presses upon Benjamin to sustain rather than abandon like a commodity that has outlived its usefulness. But, is it not Benjamin who reminds

³⁸ Compare the discussion of "bequest" in the preceding chapter, where Adorno singles this out as one of Benjamin's most significant contributions to Critical Theory.

³⁹ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, Letter 39, 107–8.

us that “there is an infinite amount of hope, but not for us.” That is, is it not Benjamin who underscores the nihilism constitutive of the longing for human immortality and who links it to religion, idolatry and/as commodity fetishism? Yet, even were it the case that what first appears as Adorno’s less than charitable reading may, in part, be due to urgency, to insufficient mediation by thought and/or time, which is suggested by his later evaluation of Benjamin’s work on history and politics and is evident in Benjamin’s influence on his later work, nonetheless, it is not entirely unwarranted. On the contrary, Benjamin not only acknowledges this in his response (via Felizitas)⁴⁰ but also explains the reasons for it.

Benjamin’s response is remarkable in several ways, not least of which is the fact that it *explicitly* sets out this first exchange as a beginning of an open and long productive conversation to which he is looking forward. Before I turn to a consideration of this relatively brief but equally important letter, I want to shed “prophetic” light on the fecund nature of this long conversation from the perspective of two letters, one from Benjamin to Adorno dated February 23, 1939, which opens with the emphatic statement “*on est philologue ou on ne l’est pas*,” the other an enthusiastic letter from Adorno to Benjamin upon receipt of “your Baudelaire,” dated February 29, 1940. This “prophetic” light also serves to illuminate the narrowness of the perspectives that seek to estrange Benjamin and Adorno. Benjamin’s letter is a response to a letter from Adorno, which, despite the situation in Europe and the plight of his parents, and after commenting on it, turns to a lengthy, detailed consideration of Benjamin’s Baudelaire essay and the entire *Arcades Project*, offering constructive

⁴⁰ Felizitas’s/Felicitas’s mediation in context of the correspondence deserves serious *philosophical* consideration. It is also clearly beyond the scope of this project. Nonetheless, it is important to mark the gap here in the consideration of Gretel Adorno’s occluded role in the philosophical conversation between Benjamin and Adorno and beyond. I emphasize Gretel’s philosophical determination against the trivial, and vulgar/gossipy, insinuation about her (sexual) relation with Benjamin. On Gretel’s important role in the Institute, see Habermas, “Dual Layered Time.”

suggestions, many of which are specifically focused on politics and history and draw connections between Benjamin's aesthetic considerations and current politics *or* between high Capitalism and Fascism. Were this letter not the result of a long, ongoing conversation, the great leaps among diverse aspects, let alone historical periods, would seem unwarranted – certainly philosophically suspect. The exclamation beginning Benjamin's response makes evident that this is hardly the case. Rather, this is an ongoing conversation between philosophers, who philologize first – who see historical constellations where others see a single sequence of events or concepts. Following the emphatic exclamation, Benjamin continues:

After I have studied your last letter, my first impulse was to return to my important bundle of papers containing your comments on the Arcades. Reading these letters again, some of which go back quite some way, was a great encouragement. I recognize once again how the original foundations have not been eroded or damaged. Above all, however, your earlier comments also helped to illuminate your last letter, and especially the reflections it contained on the question of the "type" . . . You have given the most felicitous interpretation of the letter I wrote to this effect.⁴¹

As will become evident, and pace his rescuers, both prospectively and retroactively Benjamin considers his correspondence with Adorno and responds to it as a critical, materialist dialectician. Rather than seeking to shield his writings from critique, Benjamin welcomes the critical comments and political intervention, viewing them as felicitous. And, once he receives the completed and final version of the Baudelaire essay, Adorno responds in kind, almost with the glee of a midwife:

I believe it is hardly an exaggeration to describe this work as the most perfect thing you have done since the book on the Baroque drama and the work on Kraus. If I have sometimes had a nagging conscience about my own insistent carping in the matter, I can say it has now transformed itself into a rather vain feeling of pride, and it is you who are responsible for that – however dialectical the relation between our respective productions remains.⁴²

⁴¹ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 308–9.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 319.

The extraordinary unrestrained tone of Adorno's letter, a tone that is rather uncharacteristic, "fulfills" Benjamin's "prophetic" prognostication in 1935 that Adorno's critical interventions will simultaneously benefit his writing and strengthen their friendship. Theirs is a philosophers' friendship, in which to be friends means that "*amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas*." Indeed, Benjamin describes Adorno's objections as penetrating, going "precisely to the productive heart of the issue,"⁴³ and confesses that he has no doubt that they will continue to affect his thinking but is in no position to anticipate how.

Benjamin's response to Adorno's 1935 critical comments may be characterized as a writer's apologia and provides exceptional insight into Benjamin as a writer giving voice to his form of writing, to the highly mediated mode of its generation. That Benjamin elects to address the preliminary response to Adorno through the medium of Felizitas, to whom the letter is addressed, it may be argued, is a first moment of mediation, *almost* pre-reflective, or as he characterizes it, "provisional."⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the proviso seeks to acknowledge "immediately" that this is not a second version of the Arcades project, having changed previous formulations, but rather a different version of the same project. Each version stands in dialectical opposition to the other. In that sense, from Benjamin's perspective, neither version is properly "dialectical." Rather, the need for the second sketch arises precisely from the fact that the previous insights could not, and I would add should not, have been developed out of them without further mediation, except in the form of "A Poetic Fairy-Tale," which is its subtitle. Viewed in this light, Benjamin's first sketch of the Arcades is in the spirit of Kafka, who, as Benjamin reads him, wrote fairy tales for dialecticians. That is, Kafka wrote for dialecticians but was not himself a dialectician or critical philosopher. These fairy tales provide insights, set "objects" into (almost) impossible constellations, without having to provide

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴⁴ It is important to emphasize the fact that by "*almost* pre-reflective," I do not intend preconscious. It is certainly conscious, but not self-conscious in a critical way.

“justification,” that is, arguments in their support. As Benjamin’s confession to Felizitas makes evident, his “dilatory” style of writing is due both to his intellectual temperament and to his historical circumstances. Nor are the two sketches by themselves sufficient to bring the project to fruition, let alone by dialectical labor, directly without further mediations. Rather, what is required, he states, is additional training – the constructive ones. Indeed, Adorno’s reservations about the structure were warranted precisely because the structure is not yet there. Yet, despite the dire circumstances, Benjamin refuses to be hurried or to accept the direction suggested by Adorno. In a perfectly unhurried Socratic imitation, Benjamin simultaneously expresses ignorance and certainty about the “future” of the *Arcades Project*:

But one thing is quite certain: what the constructive moment means for this book must be compared with what the philosopher’s stone means for alchemy. The only thing that can be really said about this at present is that it will have to re-articulate the opposition in which my book stands in relation to all previous and *traditional* historical research in a new, succinct and very simple fashion. How this will be done remains to be decided.⁴⁵

Benjamin’s succinct articulation of the uncertain “future” of the project is an exemplary expression of a materialist dialectic at work; it is, indeed, antiteleological and stands in stark opposition to a *traditional* Hegelian dialectics and history. It is the radical nature of the project that renders its “mechanical” completion impossible. And, it is this radical nature that is simultaneously thoroughly in the spirit of Marx’s “turning upside down” or uprooting of Hegel and, on Adorno’s reading in “Bequest,” more critical than “traditional” Critical Theory.⁴⁶ The radical nature of the project and its “dilatory” genesis are confirmed and underscored again in Benjamin’s penultimate letter to Adorno, a letter that proved to be the *philosophical* finale to their conversation.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 118.

⁴⁶ Compare the discussion of “Bequest” in [Chapter 3](#).

⁴⁷ This letter was followed by a “nonphilosophical” personal letter from Adorno to Benjamin on the occasion of his birthday (July 16, 1940), at the end of

The dilatory nature of Benjamin's "method" and the (almost) inevitable misreadings consequent upon it are not only recognized by Adorno approximately twenty years after the "first misreading" but also thematized in the light of Benjamin's description of his procedure. In the "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*," after he explains the urgency to publish Benjamin's works as arising from the "overwhelming power of the status quo" to prevent thinking/writing such as Benjamin's from ever being made public, precisely because this work is an expression of a consciousness set against the world as it is and its *justification*, a consciousness that is indifferent to the reigning form of rationality and its taboos, Adorno explains the resistance to Benjamin, a resistance simultaneously dogmatic and trite, by his uncanny comportment and procedure.

Benjamin's philosophy invites misreading: it dares the reader to consume and reduce it to a succession of desultory *apréçus*, governed by the happenstance of mood and light. This must be challenged not only by the tensely spiritual character of his insights, entirely contrary to all mollusk-like reaction even amid the most sensuous objects: every one of his insights has its place within *an extraordinary unity of philosophical consciousness*.⁴⁸

Where "traditional" philosophers see lack of unity and philosophical rigor, Adorno counters by insisting on the utmost rigor of Benjamin's thought; it has unity, but this unity requires attentiveness and the willingness to forgo cherished positions, material/institutional as well as intellectual. And, here, once again, Adorno's Benjamin bears great resemblance to Benjamin's

which Adorno asks Benjamin for his CV as well as a full list of publications in an attempt to secure a visa for him to the United States or elsewhere in the Americas. In his response to Adorno's last letter (Lourdes, August 2, 1940), which is Benjamin's final living communication, Benjamin expresses delight that Adorno remembered his birthday, appreciated his plight, and continued his efforts on his behalf, as well as a hope to send the CV to him via Geneva (having described the possible route of escape via Switzerland). It is not without profound and poignant irony that Benjamin's last communication with Adorno was posthumous and mediated via Henri Gurland (Port Bou, September 25, 1940).

⁴⁸ Smith, *On Walter Benjamin*, "Introduction," 3. Second emphasis mine.

Kafka both in terms of sacrificing truth – traditionally conceived – and in terms of almost having been lost to oblivion, which, Adorno tells us, Benjamin, like Kafka, would have preferred. The friends' betrayal of a wish here is due, as is the case with Bloch's betrayal of Kafka, to their shared debt and the shared commitment to remembrance, the condition for consciousness/thinking as the source of resistance to the barbarism whose prey Benjamin was.

Echoing Benjamin's explanation of the "second sketch" of the Arcades, Adorno further indicates that some misreadings, and this would presumably include several of his own responses, are invited by Benjamin's philosophy, at least in part, because "he preferred to incorporate thought that was foreign and dangerous to him as a sort of *inoculation* rather than entrust himself to some look-alike in which he, incorruptible, discerned complicity with the extant and official even when one behaved as if day were just breaking and one were starting anew."⁴⁹ That is, on Adorno's own account, his first response may well have failed to appreciate the fact that Benjamin "was distancing himself most energetically from precisely those contemporary philosophemes with which he seemed to be in agreement,"⁵⁰ in particular in the case of the second sketch, the surrealists and Brecht, superficially read. Indeed, twenty years after the beginning of this extraordinarily fecund epistolary exchange and fifteen years after its

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7. My emphasis. Adorno's reference here to "daybreak" as well as an earlier one describing Benjamin as a subterranean burrowing mole mistrustful of all superficial classifications, and several others, establish as explicit a relation between Benjamin and Nietzsche's *Daybreak*, Nietzsche's first reevaluation of values, in opposition to Kant and Schopenhauer, as is possible. The first paragraph opening the preface to *Daybreak* begins with the following statement: "In this book you will discover a 'subterranean man' at work, one who tunnels and mines and undermines." Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 1. The relation between Benjamin's and Nietzsche's thought is clearly beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to note, however, that Nietzsche "praises" Spinoza (as well as Plato and Goethe) here as antithetical to Kant and Schopenhauer. More important, Nietzsche finished *Daybreak* in May 1881, two months prior to his letter to Franz Overbeck of July 31, 1881, which he begins with the claim that Spinoza is his true predecessor, whose thought is separated from his own only temporally but not substantially.

⁵⁰ Smith, *On Walter Benjamin*, 7.

untimely, tragic end, in the introductory essay, the essay that announces the *real* rescue of Benjamin's thought from oblivion as well as violent misreadings, Adorno makes evident the manner in which Benjamin's response and other mediations by time and thought have reoriented his understanding of the singular or the concrete in Benjamin. Ironically, in announcing the publication of Benjamin's writings, which writings Benjamin would have rather shielded from publicity, in words strikingly at odds with his first criticism, and now in public – as distinct from the personal epistolary exchanges, which were not intended for publication nor took the form of “public” philosophical writings – Adorno praises Benjamin's uniqueness, stating, “[b]ut, what essentially distinguishes Benjamin from any and every similarity he had with his epoch was the specific gravity of the *concrete* in his philosophy. He never degraded the concrete to an example of the concept, not even to a ‘symbolic intention,’ to the trace of the messianic in the helplessly *fallen* natural world.”⁵¹

Part II. Myth, Allegory, Philology, and History

Baudelaire's allegory bears traces of the violence that was necessary to demolish the harmonious façade of the world that surrounded him.

Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside; Baudelaire evokes it from within.

Baudelaire's invectives against mythology recall those of Medieval clerics. He especially detested chubby cheeked Cupid. His aversion to this figure has the same roots as his hatred for Béranger.⁵²

The most persistent elements in the philosophical epistolary exchanges between Benjamin and Adorno in the years between 1935 and 1938 are the simultaneous emphasis on the shared interest in the materialist dialectic exposition of the relation between myth and history, the self-destruction of myth seen

⁵¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine. Compare my criticism of Habermas in [Chapter 3](#), Part II.

⁵² Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, “Baudelaire,” [J5a, 3], [J56, 2], and [J56, 3], respectively.

in the disenchantment of art, or its liquidation, and Adorno's continued "carping" for "more dialectical mediation." Contrary to the common image of Adorno as an inattentive, insensitive taskmaster, the mood of Adorno's letters is surprisingly affective, expressing both great admiration for Benjamin's work and great frustration at what he views as persistent Romantic and Brechtian elements in Benjamin's writing on art, which elements appear as undialectical oppositions between extremes, betraying Benjamin's own careful dialectical work, especially in the Baroque book, in which he carefully develops a dialectic distinguishing art as structure from both art as symbol and from the taboo of magic. In his preliminary comments on Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility," Adorno argues that in the midst of a dialectical investigation of the work of art in relation to technology, there is an undialectical, that is, unreflective reduction of the question of art's autonomy to a counterrevolutionary function. Again, contrary to prevalent interpretations of Adorno, he does not wish to single out the autonomous work of art as *the* refuge of the promise of freedom. On the contrary, that would be as undialectical as its one-sided denigration to a reactionary function. As he states quite emphatically:

There is no one who will agree with you more than I when you defend *kitsch* cinema against the quality film; but *l'art pour l'art* needs just as much defending, and the united front which now exists against it and extends, I know, from Brecht right through to the Youth Movement, is itself encouragement enough to undertake a rescue attempt.⁵³

For Adorno, the hostility toward the autonomous work of art manifest in both vulgar Marxist and Fascist politics is a hostility

⁵³ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 129 (March 18, 1936). The dialectical relation between *kitsch* and autonomous art here provides a lens through which we may interpret Adorno's astounding claim, a claim seemingly *incredible*, that in the sense that thought is a substitute for real happiness in the routine of daily life in a destitute world, "the difference between thinking and eating roast goose is not so very great." Adorno and Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto," 50.

to autonomy, or at least an illusion about the reality of the real, or the reduction of the material to the immediate.⁵⁴ Focusing precisely on the material element of the artwork, or its concrete objective dimension, Adorno insists on its distinction from the magical element. More important, Adorno's demand for mediation and his admonitions against immediacy are thoroughly political, seeking to undermine the grounding of the commitment to solidarity with the proletariat in an illusion about their form of consciousness. The claims to the *immediate* revolutionary potential of aesthetic effects, let alone their immediacy to workers' consciousness, are both an idealistic illusion and dangerous, for they ignore concrete material conditions of which forms of consciousness are but expressions. For Adorno, "the workers enjoy no advantage over their bourgeois counterparts apart from their interest in the revolution, and otherwise bear all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character."⁵⁵ Indeed, it is precisely because they bear all the marks of mutilation that the workers' interest in revolution can become reactionary and be enlisted into the service of fascist movements. It should come as no surprise, then, that, for Adorno, the relation between the working class and the intellectuals is thoroughly dialectical; being subject to the same desultory conditions, albeit in different ways, the working class needs the intellectuals for knowledge just as much as the intellectuals need the workers for revolution. The error would be to reduce the necessity to which each "class" is subject to identity. Serious critical comments notwithstanding, or perhaps precisely as the most appropriate conclusion to this critique, Adorno simultaneously recognizes the fecundity of this exchange for clarification of his and Benjamin's common commitments and praises Leninist moments in Benjamin's own work

⁵⁴ Compare the distinction between Brecht and the actionists in [Chapter 3](#). It would seem that either Adorno's evaluation of Brecht has changed significantly or that he thought that Brecht's works were in tension with the awareness about the difference between art and reality, or both.

⁵⁵ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 131.

that are at odds with Brechtian ones. Concerning the first, he states:

I am convinced that the further development of the aesthetic debate which you have so magnificently inaugurated, depends essentially upon a true evaluation of the relationship between intellectuals and the working class.

Concerning the second, he concludes the letter by stating:

I cannot conclude, however, without saying that I find your few sentences concerning the disintegration of the proletariat into “masses” through the revolution, to be amongst the most profound and most powerful statements of political theory I have encountered since I read *State and Revolution*.⁵⁶

Before proceeding, I wish to recall the discussion of the relation between the proletariat and the masses in [Chapter 2](#), and especially the fact that Spinoza was the first political philosopher to theorize the masses and their power.

A similar concern about insufficient mediation is voiced by Adorno in his first response to Benjamin’s *The Storyteller*. Here, again, after he praises Benjamin’s diagnosis of the disappearance of the storyteller to result from the loss of experience, and locates it in the perspective of a philosophy of history that he shares, Adorno once again expresses his concern with the lack of mediation. However, whereas Adorno’s earlier criticisms seemed to locate the absence of mediation in a sense of immediacy characteristic in the dialectics of Hegel’s philosophy of history, here Adorno locates the immediacy in “an essentially somatic gesture,” that is, in a radically anti-, or at least a-dialectical conception of the somatic. This somatic gesture is a mark of an anthropological materialism that Adorno emphatically cannot accept; that is, Benjamin’s philosophy of history here is one inaugurated by Feuerbach as a “critical” response to Hegel, whose critical nature is here put in question. More important, whereas there may be several reasons for the different critical disagreements between them, Adorno’s formulation here is especially telling

⁵⁶ [Ibid.](#), 132–33.

precisely insofar as he locates the disagreement at the heart of their shared commitments. What is at stake is both the matter and the history of historical materialism. As he states:

For all those other points in which, *despite our most fundamental and concrete agreement in other matters*, I differ from you could be summed up and characterized as an *anthropological materialism* that I cannot accept. It is as if for you the human body represents the measure of all concreteness.⁵⁷

Inasmuch as “the somatic gesture is invariant” (i.e., universal, as in Feuerbach’s “human”), according to Adorno, it is not (in fact, it is the contradictory of) the concrete; or, it presents an archaic rather than a dialectical image. Moreover, insofar as the “somatic gesture” “accepts” reification as a fact of the body, it is merely the inversion of an undialectical ontology rather than its rejection as partial and, as such, false. And, Adorno claims, in this sense, this is the same objection as the one he expressed against “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility” and, I would like to add, the Baudelaire work. Adorno insists that his and Benjamin’s conversation about *this fundamental difference* would be of benefit to the *Arcades Project*, which he presents as Benjamin’s *ultima philosophia*, if only he would be able to persuade Benjamin about “the inner unity of both these critical objections.”⁵⁸ Insofar as Adorno expresses the wish to successfully persuade Benjamin of such inner unity in their forthcoming meeting, and later, almost as if in an afterthought, adds that he realizes that the claim to inner unity is too general and inadequate, it seems as if no epistolar conversation, however unreserved and dialectically nuanced, is dialectical enough. I would like to suggest that this inadequacy arises, at least in part, from the letter form, its apparent teleological closure by the concluding salutation, a suggestion supported by the fact that the addendum about the inadequacy of the claim to unity

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter 55, 146. First emphasis mine. As will become evident, in a subsequent letter, Adorno would establish a close proximity between anthropological Materialism and Romanticism, with important political consequences.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 147. The emphasis on “*ultima philosophia*” is Adorno’s.

occurs after the signature but without being preceded by the “conventional” “P.S.” There is much at stake in the identification of “anthropological materialism” as the fundamental cause of the disagreements between Benjamin and Adorno, let alone in Adorno’s further identification of this “materialism” as the source of Benjamin’s continuous betrayal of his most important “concept,” the “dialectical image” and its transformation into an archaic one, made evident in the overhasty acceptance of the facticity and immediacy of the reified body exemplified in the presentation of the somatic gesture as invariant. This is of a piece with Adorno’s criticism of the one-sidedness of Benjamin’s presentation of the autonomous artwork *merely* as reified rather than dialectically, that is, also as a site of possible *concrete*, that is, *objective* historical and political/freedom, rather than metaphysical subjective freedom. It is, therefore, especially unfortunate that Benjamin’s response to this letter, assuming that he responded, is not extant. Nevertheless, several subsequent letters suggest that Adorno was successful at least to some extent and only intermittently in persuading Benjamin about both the danger of his methodological procedure and the need for more mediation. As the subsequent letters suggest, the intermittent nature of Adorno’s persuasive success is most likely due to Benjamin’s procedure of forging extreme perspectives prior to bringing them into a dialectical relation through “structure,” that is, mediating theory. As the discussion of Adorno’s letter upon receipt of the final version of the Baudelaire work makes evident, the result was in his view highly successful. In Benjamin’s view, the persuading was mutual, that is, truly dialectical. As he states in one letter subsequent to their meeting, “I can see that we have also shared the same dexterity in advancing our ownmost thought, inconspicuously in each case, but without making any concessions.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ One of the most striking examples of this is found in Benjamin’s letter to Adorno dated March 1, 1937, where in response to Adorno’s very critical essay on Mannheim (“*Neue wertfreie Soziologie. Aus Anlass von Karl Manheims ‘Mensch und Gesellschaft im Zeitalter des Umbaus,’*” vol. 20.1 in Adorno’s *Gesammelte Schriften*), Benjamin exclaims, “I joyfully received like a gift, if I may put it that way: your claim... that the priority of

Differences indeed continued and continue to be fecund to the works of both Benjamin and Adorno.

The most important differences and misreadings continue to affect the exchanges on the *Arcades Project*, the work which Adorno prophetically described as Benjamin's *ultima philosophia*, unaware of the fact that it was to become *ultima* in the literal sense as well. Again, these differences disclose differences between two philosophical temperaments and their corresponding methodological procedures. Of these, the most important is found in an exchange of letters in late 1938, which, although its focus is keenly on the relation between the Baudelaire work and the *Arcades Project*, returns to what Adorno views as Benjamin's tendency toward anthropological materialism – here also identified to “harbor profoundly romantic elements”⁶⁰ and, more important, turns into a concurrent discussion of Marxism, that is, another materialism, an historical one. In addition to methodological reservations that repeat previous criticism, as the lengthy letter unfolds, it becomes clear that, in Adorno's view, Benjamin's romantic tendencies and lapses into anthropological materialism are of a piece with his lapses into vulgar Marxist orthodoxy. And, here again, since what is at issue is the “matter” of different materialisms, Adorno counters the Romantic, Feuerbachian, and vulgar Marxist lapses with Marx and dialectical materialism; against various forms of “humanist” metaphysics, even when disguised, and in the same vein as the critique of the somatic gesture, Adorno enlists epistemology and politics. Since the methodological and epistemological questions cannot be severed, except nondialectically, it is clear that, in Adorno's view, Benjamin's methodological asceticism, his failure to provide a theoretical interpretation of “material” elements central to the *Arcades* (and Baudelaire), such as “panorama and traces,

social being over consciousness possesses an essentially methodological significance; and the banning of ‘examples’ from the domain of dialectical method. Insights like this are music to my mind, and one which gives me the deepest pleasure.” Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, Letter 67, 168.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Letter 110, 283.

the *flâneur* and the arcades, modernity and the ever-same,”⁶¹ are inseparable from the reduction of the dialectical image to the archaic one. Without interpretation, these “material objects” are at risk of becoming consumed by their own aura. The theoretical lapse is also and, more important, a political one; without mediation, the interpretative asceticism collapses into its opposite, “the realm where history and magic oscillate.”⁶²

The very fine line between magic and myth, philology and history, especially in terms of the respective theologico-political horizon(s) toward which they open, is the focus of Adorno’s critique in this letter, a critique that expresses disappointment and is exceptionally blunt. Instead of breaking the spell of magic, calling things by their names – Benjamin’s brilliant methodological enlisting of the service of theology in other writings – here he slips into “wide-eyed presentation of *mere* facts.” But, in the most unforgiving statement, one which is the mirror image of the extreme delight he expresses upon receipt of the final version of the Baudelaire work, Adorno crystallizes the political danger inherent in the con-plexion of Romanticism, anthropological Materialism, and vulgar Marxism.

If one wants to put it rather drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. This spot is bewitched. Only theory could break this spell – your own resolute and salutary speculative theory. *It is simply the claim of this theory that I bring against you here.*⁶³

This is tough love. In a role reversal worthy of Freudian analysis, Adorno acts as Benjamin’s super ego. This is not surprising in the light of his ongoing and profound involvement in the gestation of this work. And, once again, Adorno deploys Benjamin’s own work against him quite literally.⁶⁴ The form of the demand for more theory is not merely an abstract one, reflecting Adorno’s

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 282.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 283. My emphasis.

⁶⁴ The reversals of psychological and gender roles in this correspondence is worthy of further study. Recall that in the final exchange, Adorno’s pride in

own predilection, but rather deploys Benjamin's work on the same motifs in the *Arcades Project* against the early versions of the Baudelaire essay in which, according to Adorno, Benjamin fails to provide the mediation between super- and infrastructure. Without a careful analysis of the commodity form in terms of the social and economic tendencies of the nineteenth century, the relation between the duty on wine and Baudelaire's wine poems presents phenomena as if they possessed qualities that they have lost under Capitalism; that is, the presentation is ahistorical and thereby also loses all critical-political force.

The figure of the "ragpicker" (*Lumpensammler*) provides the focus for Adorno's most explicit concern with Benjamin's Marxism, both at the theoretical and the personal level. In evocatively lyrical terms, Adorno points out that Benjamin's presentation of this figure at the extreme limit of abject poverty "conveys nothing of the dog-like cringing; nothing of the sack slung over the back, nothing of the voice, which for instance, provides much of the somber background for the entire opera in Charpentier's *Louise*, nothing of the meteoric train of jeering children behind the old man."⁶⁵ Insofar as the abject figure of the ragpicker could or should have provided the occasion to theorize what it stands for in capitalist economy, namely, that it "subjects even rubbish to exchange value," Adorno presents Benjamin's reticence as an asceticism worthy of a Savonarola, exclaiming, "What it must have cost you not to take it up!"⁶⁶ Adorno interprets Benjamin's "asceticism," an asceticism that compels him to do violence to his own thought, to originate in a form of Marxist orthodoxy that is "appropriate neither to Marxism nor to yourself"; against Marxism because it omits the mediation through the entire social and economic process, confusing discrete example with the lucidity that only theory can provide; against himself because he deprives himself of his "most fruitful ideas through a kind of

the final manuscript is worthy of a midwife. The father has been displaced, replaced, or cathected by the mother. See above.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 283–84.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 284.

pre-censorship in accordance with materialist categories (which are not Marxist ones) even if this is only in terms of the aforementioned postponement.”⁶⁷ Not only would the cause of dialectical materialism be better advanced through Benjamin’s uncensored ideas but, as Adorno bluntly puts it, Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* contains more materialist critical insights than Bukharin’s *ABC of Communism*, and Benjamin’s Goethe and Baroque studies represent better Marxism than his Baudelaire study, despite the latter’s explicit deployment of apparently concrete economic phenomena and their corresponding forms of consciousness in the nineteenth century.

The intermingling of personal and impersonal (editorial) elements lends an awkwardness to parts of Adorno’s letter that is uncharacteristic, although not inexplicable, not only because he is charged with the task of being the bearer of bad news, namely, delaying publication of Parts II and III of the Baudelaire study, but also because, by his own account, he was the principal objector to publishing it in this form. Rather than being based upon editorial considerations, Adorno’s decision to delay publication was determined “for your own sake and the sake of Baudelaire. This study does not represent you as this, of all your writings, must represent you,”⁶⁸ and Adorno adds, because when completed, that is, when given its full structure, it should have an “undiminished impact,” that is, gain the same stature as did the Baroque book, the standard of Benjamin’s excellence theretofore in Adorno’s judgment. Fully aware of the harsh tone of his critique, which he attributes to the importance of Benjamin’s work, Adorno asks Benjamin to be “gentler” in his critique of the just completed, and hastily written, “On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,” claiming that it has a “more innocuous character.” Is Adorno falsely modest here? I think not. Rather, in a manner similar to the first exchange of 1935, there is an urgency to the Baudelaire and *Arcade* works precisely because they can provide a theoretical weapon against

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 285.

current barbarism by far more powerful and extensive than the more limited study in Adorno's essay.

The form of Adorno's invitation of Benjamin's critique is highly disclosive of the dialectical nature of their ongoing dialogue. "I am particularly eager to hear your response to the theory that today exchange value itself is being consumed. The *tension* between this theory and your own concerning the buyer's empathy with the soul of the commodity [*Wharenseele*] could prove to be a very fruitful one."⁶⁹ The brief description of the difference between their respective theories, the second of which is described as "an empathy with the soul of the commodity," is the most insightful crystallization of the differences between two intellectual temperaments, differences that lead to misreadings about subjects most important to both Benjamin and Adorno, the direct engagements with which also lead to the further enrichment of their respective theories. Again, the methodological questions are simultaneously political ones. A theory of reification based upon an attribution of soul-fulness to the commodity is worthy of a philosopher-storyteller who refuses to accept the destruction of experience, let alone of the capacity to communicate it, that was once considered to be "inalienable to us."⁷⁰

If Kafka wrote fairy tales for dialecticians, as Benjamin tells us, Benjamin wrote a theology for unbelievers or for things in no need for theology. But this is another reason for the proliferate misreading of his works. "My thinking is related to theology as a blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain."⁷¹ For Benjamin, then, "thou shall not" includes the written word, including his own, especially if the word is understood ontologically rather than historically. In a consistently rabbinic fashion, Benjamin's concern is with transmissibility rather than truth, or the concern with truth is historical in a peculiarly theological manner; the afterlife of texts demands the continuous

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 286. My emphasis.

⁷⁰ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Selected Writings*, 3:142.

⁷¹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [N7a, 7], 471.

effort to demystify, to prevent their fetishization. As the correspondence makes amply evident, what Benjamin understands by history, especially its availability to us, is in tension with Adorno, at the very least with the materialist methodology, which for Benjamin, and much later also for Adorno, seeks to bring about a unique experience with an epoch.

Historical “understanding” is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the “afterlife of works,” in the analysis of “fame,” is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general.⁷²

Even more than Nietzsche, but in the same spirit, for Benjamin, before one can philosophize as a historical materialist, one must philologize first.

Both the response to Adorno’s letter and *The Arcades Project* repeat the centrality of philology to Benjamin’s work and “dilatatory method” of construction, a method that Adorno either fails to understand or at least with which he is impatient, if for no other reason than the political urgency of the work. Ironically, as will become evident, Benjamin, too, in the response, acknowledges the urgency and presents it as one of the reasons for his methodology. Beginning the response by quoting Adorno’s frustration with the absence of interpretation of the key concepts “panorama” and “traces,” the “*flâneur*” and the “arcades,” “modernity” and “the ever-same,” Benjamin states that Adorno’s impatient search for a description (*signalement*) led to misinterpretation. “You were bound to arrive at what was to you a disappointing view of the third section, once it had escaped your attention that nowhere is modernity cited as the ever-same – and this important *key concept* is not actually exploited in the completed portion of the study.”⁷³ As the response repeatedly indicates,

⁷² *Ibid.*, [N2, 3], 460.

⁷³ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, Letter 111 (December 9, 1938), 290. The translator’s decision to use “*signalement*” is entirely unclear in the absence of a note explaining why “description” is inadequate. I return to the status of modernity, the ever-same, and ever-new, in the last part of this chapter.

Adorno's misunderstanding arises from the fact that he treats an incomplete study as if it were complete. According to Benjamin, as it is presented in the second part, "modernity" is Baudelaire's modernity rather than providing the philosophical elaboration that is postponed to the third part, beginning with the concept of Art Nouveau and concluding with the dialectical analysis of the new and the ever-same. Rather than directly disagree with Adorno about the nature of the "empirical object," Benjamin argues that one must begin from its "vulgar presentation" in order to expose it to criticism. The materialist philosopher must begin with philology precisely in order to explode the philologist methodological conceit. Repeatedly insisting that an historical materialist philosophy, one critically concerned with the configuration of an epoch in relation to the before and after that it "proudly" announces as its pre- and posthistory, must begin with philology in order to explode its definite unity, the unitary presentation of details that "magically fixate the reader."⁷⁴

Benjamin's painstakingly detailed response to Adorno's criticism makes amply evident the fact that they do not disagree about substance nor about the inseparability between methodology and epistemology; rather, they disagree about the manner in which methodology becomes epistemology, how it brings about clarity. And, here, Benjamin not only adopts the philologist's attitude but also enlists the service of theology, or more precisely Jewish philosophical-biblical exegesis. His elaboration of the manner in which he intends to provide a "penetrating interpretation" (*schlagende Deutung*) of the important concept of the "trace," and its "obliteration or ossification of the individual in the big-city crowd," recalls Maimonides' interpretation of the relation between the exoteric and esoteric levels of the Bible, a presentation that is radically opposed to the esotericism associated with mysticism, myth, and magic – Jewish or Christian – that the Law seeks to eradicate, according to Maimonides.⁷⁵ Moreover,

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 292. Cf. *Arcades Project* [N7a,1] and [N7a, 8], 470–71.

⁷⁵ Compare the discussion of the relation between tradition and philosophy and Adorno's claim that exegesis exalts neither interpretation nor the symbol into

it is this elaboration that makes visible the philosophical opposition between the concept of the trace and that of the aura and, thereby, between the dialectical image and the archaic one. As Benjamin argues:

But the treatment of traces in the second part must remain on this level [of direct presentation] precisely if it is to receive *a sudden illumination* [*blitzartige Erhellung*] in the decisive context later on. This *illumination* is intended.⁷⁶

More important, in the following discussion of Adorno's objections to the mode of the *flâneur*'s presentation in the Baudelaire study, objections based on what Benjamin presents as an erroneous approach that made him feel as though the ground were giving way beneath him, he generously attributes this to the fecund tension between their respective theories introduced at the end of Adorno's letter as their divergent analyses of the commodity, respectively, in terms of the consumption of exchange value as distinct from the empathy with the soul of the commodity. Adding that he regards empathy with the soul of the commodity as a theory in the *strict sense*, which is the culmination of the discussion of the *flâneur*, Benjamin describes his theory further in terms of illumination:

This is the place, and indeed the only place in this part, where the theory comes into its own in *undistorted* fashion. It breaks like a single ray of light into an artificially darkened chamber. But this ray, broken down prismatically, suffices to give an idea of the nature of the light whose focus lies in the third part of the book. That is why this theory of the *flâneur* . . . essentially redeems the pictures of the *flâneur* that I have had in mind for many years.⁷⁷

And, insofar as Benjamin presents terms such as *panorama* and *arcades* either as peripheral or as irrelevant to the

an absolute but seeks the truth where thinking secularizes the irretrievable archetypes of sacred texts. *Negative Dialectics*, 55.

⁷⁶ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 290. My emphases. See the discussion of sudden illumination in Maimonides, *Guide I*, Introduction.

⁷⁷ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 290, and see Maimonides, *Guide I*, Introduction.

Baudelaire study, some of Adorno's objections appear at best pedantic. Yet, Benjamin is also explicit that the manuscript is incomplete, requiring further, detailed clarification, and readily accepts the importance of Adorno's claims about the ragpicker. Insofar as the absolute abjection of the ragpicker, *in the order of the discarded, abject, forgotten*, is the dialectical opposite of Kafka's beggar, the former representing the absence of hope beyond the hope of the hopeless emphasized by Adorno, the latter the redemptive hope of the hopeless, who exchanges the teleologically oriented wish for its past or present fulfillment, not only is Benjamin's initial marginal treatment of the ragpicker in the Baudelaire work in profound dialectical tension with his very subtle treatment of the beggar in the Kafka study, but also Adorno's lyrical emphasis on the profound abjection of the ragpicker discloses much about the difference between their intellectual temperaments and sheds light on their choice and approach to the "concrete objects" of their work. In fact, as will become evident, Benjamin highlights the difference between the "positive" and "negative" aspects, which they respectively emphasize as the fecund source of their dialectical relation.

Benjamin not only readily admits to adopting the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts, "the true philological attitude," but also he presents such an attitude as necessary for superseding "mere fact," a superseding that is their implosion, exposing the indifference, hence identity, between magic and positivism that must be liquidated. And for Benjamin, in agreement with Adorno, it is the task of philosophy to exorcise the magical element, the element that insists not only on the transparency of facts but also and dangerously on their neutrality and, he reminds Adorno, "[i]f you consider my other writings, you will find that a critique of the philological attitude is an old concern of mine – and is essentially identical to my critique of myth."⁷⁸ Adding that "in each case it is the critique which provokes the philological effort itself," Benjamin, again, emphatically insists that the dialectical materialist must begin with the apparent empirical

⁷⁸ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 292.

facticity of the philologist's object in order to explode the mythical spell, a spell whose power dissipates to the extent that the "object" is constructed in an historical perspective, so that the truth of its material content "can be historically deciphered."⁷⁹

As for Nietzsche, so for Benjamin, the parody of philology is a very serious business; construction requires the destruction of idols. The political significance of the liberation from myth is underscored in Benjamin's response to Adorno's impatient "misreading" of the *flâneur* as a symptom of the modern metropolis. Nonetheless, as Benjamin readily admits, Adorno's inability to see the political force of the theoretical progress in successive views of the masses, of which the theory of the *flâneur* is a significant part, at least in part, is due to the need for further elaboration and clarification. The critique of the concept of the masses, whose initial development Adorno highly lauded as the equal of Lenin's *State and Revolution* at the end of the 1936 letter on "The Work of Art,"⁸⁰ not only required careful development in the final version but also, and more important, needs to be given a central position, culminating in Hugo rather than Baudelaire, since "more than any other writer it was Hugo who anticipated the contemporary experience of the masses. The demagogue in him is an element of his genius."⁸¹

In response to Adorno's interpretation of his theoretical asceticism to originate in an erroneous solidarity with the dialectical materialism of the Institute, Benjamin responds in an equally political manner, but one that moves from an abstract solidarity with the Institute and fidelity to an abstract dialectical materialism to a concrete political and historically situated one. As he states, when he refused to pursue "an esoteric intellectual path for himself" or be rushed into theoretical speculation, despite or even at times against his *immediate* interests as a writer, "there was more at stake than solidarity with the Institute or simple fidelity to dialectical materialism, namely, a solidarity with *the*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ See earlier discussion.

⁸¹ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 294.

experience which we all shared in the last fifteen years. Here, too, it is therefore a question of my most *personal* interests as a writer.”⁸²

Rather than deny that his “choice” – if one can call it that – did not at times violate his own interests, Benjamin explains this “choice” by an antagonism of which he “does not wish to be relieved even in [his] dreams. An overcoming of this antagonism constitutes the problem of my study, and that is the problem of construction.”⁸³ As in the response to Adorno’s 1935 critique, where he explicitly refuses to be hurried despite the political situation and need for critique, Benjamin’s explanation is at once political and psychological. Benjamin the writer cannot relieve himself of the antagonism that he inhabits and that presents itself in the form of discrete drafts, each devoted to distinct materials, which he collects successively and in which he immerses himself for the sake of a historical materialist theory, a theory emerging from the concrete historical details rather than imposing itself upon them, forcing them into conformity with either teleological necessity or political need.

I believe that speculation can only begin its inevitably audacious flight if, instead of donning the waxen wings of esotericism, it takes its source of strength in construction alone. It is the *need* [*bedingte*] of construction which dictates that the second part of my book should consist primarily of philological material. What is involved here is less a case of “ascetic discipline” than a methodological precaution.⁸⁴

Countering Adorno’s interpretation of his asceticism to arise from a monastic discipline worthy of a Savanarola, a deliberate self-mutilating discipline, Benjamin responds: not at all. There may have been discipline involved, but not a self-abnegating one. The antagonism that Benjamin inhabits (or that inhabits him) is that between myth, of which the most powerful spell

⁸² *Ibid.*, 291. My emphasis. The difference between Benjamin’s *immediate* interest as a writer and his personal interest, as a writer, which is mediated by a fifteen-year shared experience, is worth underlining.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

is messianic mysticism, and history as remembrance, the former often appearing as positivist science, the latter as the theology of Judgment Day. In response to Horkheimer's reflection on the question of the incompleteness of history that insists that unless it includes completeness within it, the claim to incompleteness is idealistic, for the dead are really dead, suffering is complete, and unhappiness rather than happiness is sealed by death, Benjamin offers a corrective:

What science has "determined," remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an *experience* that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with *immediate* theological concepts.⁸⁵

It is in remembrance that the past can be *redeemed*, teleological necessity undermined, as will become evident in the following chapter.

In response to Adorno's essay on jazz and the regression of listening, reflecting upon the difference between their philosophical approaches in terms of the distinct art "objects" they study as symptoms of capitalist consumption, as well as their distinct forms of perception, the acoustic perception of jazz and the visual perception of film, Benjamin states that he cannot determine whether their differences are theoretical or aspectival. "Perhaps it is only a case of apparent differences between two perspectives, which are in fact equally adequately directed toward different objects."⁸⁶ Adding that he does not "mean to suggest that acoustic and optical perception are equally susceptible to revolutionary transformation," Benjamin offers this as an explanation both of his failure to understand Adorno's dismissal of any suggestion that jazz may contain a revolutionary possibility that will render possible a "completely new way of listening," as film may have, on Benjamin's account, and for his own inability to have

⁸⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [N8, 1], 471. My emphases. The fragment quotes at some length Horkheimer's letter of March 16, 1937.

⁸⁶ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 295.

“a completely intelligible experience” listening to Mahler.⁸⁷ Benjamin’s description of the difference between their approaches as respectively articulating positive and negative moments both distills the dialectical nature of their epistolary exchange and makes manifest its fecund origin in their opposed intellectual temperaments; it also provides insight into their respective relation to history, from which Benjamin sometimes takes flight by focusing too intensely upon the concrete as if it were sacred, otherwise than historical. Benjamin admits as much and recognizes its political importance, stating that, had he devoted more attention to the “psychological types produced by industry” and the way in which they are produced, his study “would have gained something in *historical plasticity*,” which plasticity would have clarified for him the manner in which “the launching of the sound film must be regarded as an operation of the film industry designed to break the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, which had produced reactions that were difficult to control and hence dangerous politically.”⁸⁸ Benjamin adds that an analysis of the sound film would constitute both a critique of contemporary art and the dialectical mediation between their respective views.

In response to Benjamin’s comment on his inability to make the experience of Mahler’s music fully intelligible, Adorno would respond, of course not, it should not be because it is a breach of bourgeois aesthetics, but a breach reflecting on the forms of bourgeois aesthetics. Adorno’s radical critique of jazz is of a piece with his critique of actionism as a false form of praxis that believes

⁸⁷ Note that Adorno does not dismiss *tout court* this possibility with respect to film. See “On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,” in Arato and Gephardt, *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. For an interesting recent discussion of the relation between acoustic and visual perception that, on the basis of feigned ignorance of music, reaches the opposite conclusion about the respective abilities of the acoustic and visual to confront the refusal of modernism to die gracefully, see Clarke, “Grey Panic.” In this review of a Richter retrospective at the Tate Modern, Clarke claims that Richter’s Duchamp is a poor substitute to Boulez’s Mahler. It is unclear, however, whether Clarke intends this judgment to extend beyond this comparison since he attributes, to some extent, Richter’s pedantic response to Cage’s tutelage.

⁸⁸ Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 295. My emphasis.

itself to be free precisely because it originates in an unreflective form of consciousness that, to paraphrase Spinoza, is conscious of its appetite but unconscious of the causes, that is, the genesis, of its appetite in the culture industry. Rather than representing a new, progressive form of artistic autonomy, the freedom from formal musical convention, from what is presented as the old and outmoded repression of spontaneous, individual expression, is in fact regressive not at all as a return to an earlier stage of development but rather as a form of arrested development, one that is entirely ignorant of musical convention. In a contrary to fact subjunctive mood similar to Kafka's subjects of hope or of Jewish humor, Adorno remarks, "As little as regressive listening is a symptom of progress in consciousness of freedom, it could suddenly turn around if art, in unity with society, should ever leave the road of the always identical."⁸⁹ Against the temptation of dreaming of possibility with open but unreflective eyes, Adorno insists that whatever possibility may be found, it will be found in artistic rather than popular culture. The masses who consume mass culture are a symptom of the disintegration of the middle class or proletariat rather than its representative. Precisely stated, the intellectual is in material need of a dialectical other who no longer exists, nor can she conjure it back into existence. Mahler is incomprehensible or a scandal to bourgeois aesthetics because he disregards the standards of bourgeois aesthetics; he exploits its vulgar forms rather than being ignorant of artistic form and its vulgarized modes, and thereby he transforms them into something new and unrecognized. Mahler's music is new precisely because it exposes the concept of musical progress as false. It is precisely by incorporating and exploiting the vulgar elements to *present* a new compositional whole that Mahler's music expresses a form of the social whole that is both prophetic and new, even if ominous. Viewed in this light, Adorno's Mahler adopts toward high Bourgeois music the philologist's mood that Benjamin adopts toward the high Bourgeois city dweller. In this sense Mahler is paradoxically also the true precursor of both

⁸⁹ Adorno, "On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening," 298.

Schönberg and Webern, who consciously seek to resist regressive listening. As Adorno states:

indeed one can almost think that in Mahler's music this experience was seismographically recorded forty years before it permeated society. But if Mahler stood athwart the concept of musical progress, neither can the new and radical music whose most advanced practitioners give allegiance to him in a seemingly paradoxical way any longer be subsumed exclusively under the concept of progress. . . . The terror which Schönberg and Webern spread, *today as in the past*, comes not from their incomprehensibility, but from the fact that they are too correctly understood. Their music gives form to that anxiety, that terror, that insight into the catastrophic situation which others merely evade by regressing.⁹⁰

As Adorno poignantly notes at the end of the essay, the interpretation of these composers as individualist is highly ironic precisely insofar as their works are single-mindedly in critical "dialogue" with the forces that relentlessly seek to finally and completely liquidate individuality.⁹¹

If, in their epistolary exchange, Adorno at times critiques with a hammer, Benjamin does so with a fine scalpel; if some of Adorno's critique of Benjamin's Baudelaire work is, at times, surprisingly unsubtle, the critique of a father knowing "what is best for you," Benjamin's is almost always playful, sometimes with the subtlety of an adult, sometimes with the single-minded, even malicious oblivion of the child, sometimes, and at his best, both. Thus, following his very generous reading of Adorno's essay on jazz at the end of his response to Adorno's ungenerous readings, Benjamin posits a seemingly puzzled question whose critical edge is razor sharp: "What is the significance of the fact that music

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

⁹¹ A critical discussion of the relation between the concepts of Modernity, the new, and the ever-same, let alone the complicity between the Modern understood in terms of historical periodization, is far beyond the scope of this chapter. I return to the difference between the new and the ever-same in the following chapter in the discussion of the inseparability of art and politics, where I focus on the problem of the possibility of experience today. For a very fine, succinct engagement of the different prominent interpretations of Adorno's view of the relative autonomy of art and its emancipatory possibilities, see Martin, "Autonomy and Anti-Art."

and lyric poetry can become comic? I can hardly imagine that this is an entirely negative phenomenon. Or do you see a positive element in the ‘decline of sacred reconciliation’? I confess that I can’t quite see my way here. Perhaps you will take the opportunity to return to this question.”⁹² At the end, it is Benjamin who discloses an undialectical moment in Adorno’s thought on music, that is, on that which was nearest to Adorno, a lack of mediation that borders on melancholy resignation, a moment that threatens to betray Adorno’s exquisitely subtle ability to sustain the utopian moment in thought against utopia. But, perhaps, the best insight into the difference between Benjamin’s and Adorno’s conceptions of dialectics is provided by Benjamin in response to Adorno’s critique of his “wide-eyed presentation of mere facts” citing Adorno:

You write in your Kierkegaard that “astonishment” reveals “the profoundest insight into the relationship between dialectics, myth, and image.” I might feel tempted to invoke this passage here. But instead I propose an amendment to it. . . . I think one should say that astonishment is an outstanding *object* of such an insight.⁹³

I want to suggest that the difference between the temperaments and dialectical procedures may well be characterized as that between a practicing philosopher and musician as distinct from an essayist, letter-writer, and collector. Where Adorno sees thought at work, Benjamin sees objects, or rather thought reified. It is no exaggeration to claim that no composition re-presents Benjamin, the collector, more fully than does *The Arcades Project* in which Benjamin can be said to liberate reified thought through new, ever-changing constellations.

Postscript

There must be a human estate that demands no sacrifices.⁹⁴

⁹² Adorno and Benjamin, *Complete Correspondence*, 296.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁹⁴ This sentence concludes Adorno’s description of the idea animating Benjamin’s life, the idea that constitutes his enduring legacy in “Benjamin the Letter Writer,” 337.

This chapter was motivated by misreadings of Benjamin, some of which deliberately and forcibly appropriated his thought into a philosophical tradition to which he does not belong and an idiom foreign to his, others, especially Adorno's, Benjamin himself explains to have been occasioned by his dilatory process of writing. Adorno's first account of these misreadings in the 1955 "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*," in which he states that "Benjamin's philosophy invites misreadings: it dares the reader to consume and reduce it to a succession of desultory *aperçus*, governed by the happenstance of mood and light," echoes this sentiment. What then are we to make of Adorno's apparently contradictory later claim in the 1966 brief essay "Benjamin the Letter Writer" that "Benjamin was anything but a misunderstood writer who would not be re-discovered until today. His quality remained hidden *only from the envious*; through journalistic media like the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the *Literarische Welt* it became generally visible."⁹⁵ Is Adorno reflecting on his own misreadings and judging retroactively? I think not, first because Adorno "discovered" Benjamin's importance very early indeed and his own thought remained in conversation with Benjamin's even posthumously. Second, and more important, Adorno's "misreadings," if indeed they were misreadings, took place in private and were occasioned by compassion, the love of philosophers contradictory of envy, in Spinoza's explanation of the passions, understood precisely as com-passion, undergoing or suffering in common. No argument in favor of this claim can be more compelling than Adorno's unrestrained praise of the final version of the Baudelaire study, the study at the heart of the successive and by all accounts successful misreadings.

⁹⁵ Smith, *On Walter Benjamin*, 336. My emphasis.

Untimely Timeliness

Historical Reversals, the Possibility of Experience, and Critical Praxis

A Historical Materialist Apologia: Aristotle or Augustine

For significantly different reasons, and with significantly different consequences, both Aristotle and Augustine underscore the nonexistence of past and future and hence the absurdity (absurd/*atopos*) or placelessness of a linear conception of time. For Aristotle, this conclusion does not undermine the importance of history (*historien*), or of didactic stories about *past* deeds that orient and habituate practice so as to form or inform a political ethos. For history is not oriented by, or toward, a single *future* telos but rather by concern for *present* flourishing, and flourishing is always already political rather than individual. In contrast, Augustine's delicately subtle discussion of time in the *Confessions*, a discussion which is a- or prehistorical, locating time in the presence/present of the soul, underscores the radical separation between the "City of God" and the "City of Man" [*sic*] in a manner such that time and history are placed into diabolically contradictory relations, oriented by and toward two opposing teloi, salvation and damnation. Absurdity notwithstanding, the linear, teleological notion of time, the time of the City of Man, becomes the time not only of a theology of history but also of the modern philosophy of history and modern politics, consequent upon the emergence of the modern subject whose individuality

and autonomy ensure the erasure of the dialectical contradiction between, and the positivist conflation of, the two cities, be they conservative or liberal.

Irrespective not only of the differences between their accounts but also of their subsequent appropriations and transformations, for neither Aristotle nor Augustine is time or even history oriented teleologically, let alone progressively. But, whereas for Aristotle, the notion of a universal or single telos would be incoherent, so that the question of happiness (*eudaimonia*) is strictly political and depends upon right practice, for Augustine, the universal human telos is ahistorical, and political history, the story of future orientation that underlines and motivates subsequent progressive history, is a movement away from happiness/salvation. That is, whereas for Aristotle, the question of right practice is central to human freedom and flourishing, for Augustine, human freedom is in a significant way freedom from politics. Or, whereas for Aristotle, the question of freedom is strictly a political one, for Augustine, it is individual and metaphysical.

The Modern appropriation of Augustine's subject of experience, a subject whose experience is always double, material and mental, and its reduction to the mental inaugurated by Descartes and culminating in Kant's repudiation of vulgar experience, erases the Augustinian dialectical tension. History becomes a single movement teleologically oriented to future redemption/happiness or perpetual peace made possible by a divination that gives meaning/justification to concrete material violence. Since, for Kant, future happiness cannot be derived rationally on the basis of material, that is, mechanical causality, the hope for meaning in history does not render historical violence necessary. That is why for both Benjamin and Adorno the critique of the philosophy of history turns predominantly to Kant and only secondarily to Hegel's rationalization of the real. More precisely and all too briefly, the critique of the philosophy of history is first and foremost a critique of religion since the rationalization of the real, which renders violence absolute and dissociates the question of freedom from the question of happiness, covers over the theologico-political origins of violence.

If a brief return to Augustine is necessary for situating the question of teleology in history, a momentary turn to Aristotle is necessary for situating the question of practice. Although I have continuously and variously alluded to the violence constitutive of the formation of the philosophical canon, a discussion of the multiple violent baptisms of Aristotle remains far beyond the confines of this concluding chapter. Instead, for the purpose of shedding light on the following analyses of the possibility of experience and critical praxis today, suffice it to point out that the baptism/distortion of Aristotle's materialism is occasioned by theologico-political condemnations as a result of which Aristotle's understanding of praxis, especially in its relation to happiness, is lost, precisely insofar as, and to the extent that, the dialectical relation between theory and praxis is severed, and political happiness becomes individual/subjective salvation in virtue of contemplation. That is, it cannot be overemphasized that it is not only praxis that is deformed but also theory! Differently but precisely stated, the radical distinction between the *vita activa*, that is, "political life," and the *vita contemplativa*, that is, "contemplative," apolitical, monastic life, is a strictly Christian one. For, it is indeed Christianity whose legitimation as an *orthodoxy* (i.e., correct belief) is predicated upon its rejection of Jewish *orthopraxy* (i.e., correct praxis), where the radical separation between theory and praxis originates, with its attendant denigration of bodies and politics. It is not surprising, therefore, that with the "loss" of Aristotelian materialism, whose primary concern in the Judaeo-Arabic tradition is ethics/politics, that is, thoughtful praxis, its subsequent influence is ignored, and Spinoza's *Ethics* is read as a metaphysics by Spinozists and anti-Spinozists alike, with few important exceptions, most important among whom are Marx and Freud.¹

Viewed in this light, it is important to note that, even if the opposition between Jerusalem and Athens (or Rome) may be credible with respect to the radical difference between *Logos*

¹ Cf. Chapter 2. For a discussion of an other materialist Aristotelian tradition, see Chapter 1 and Dobbs-Weinstein, "Whose History?"

and *Nomos* (which, in my view, it is not, or rather, again, is of Christian origins), with respect to human flourishing, they share a commitment to a present ethos, to *salus* as *salus publica*, rather than individual future salvation. And, indeed, one of the underlying claims of this chapter is that both Benjamin and Adorno are following Marx (and indeed Spinoza) in an attempt to retrieve an other politics and a nonreductive notion of praxis, a praxis that is thoughtful rather than instrumental. It is not surprising, therefore, that both Benjamin and Adorno recall the Halakhic Jewish prohibition against preparation for the messianic age, that is, against the messianic orientation of politics, even or precisely when they invoke the standpoint of redemption. While the demands of redemption are all too readily and distortedly acknowledged in relation to Benjamin, with few (not unproblematic) exceptions, for example, Habermas, they are either ignored or significantly misconstrued in relation to Adorno.² Hence, before proceeding, it is worth recalling Adorno's claims at the very end of *Minima Moralia*:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.³

And, as will become evident, for both Benjamin and Adorno, redemption is the redemption of the past.

Part I. History as Catastrophe

I. Against the Grain of History

In what follows I first further explore the nature and depth of Benjamin's and Adorno's materialist critique of the philosophy of history not only as a metaphysical fiction but, more important, as a fiction which, under the guise of culture, harbors and shields the barbarism at the heart of civilization. Second, I analyze in detail the manner in which the more culture insists on its

² See the critical engagement with Habermas in [Chapters 1, 3, and 4](#).

³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

progress beyond barbarism, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, the more it claims to have overcome the past, a claim, in fact, clamor, especially insistent in technologically advanced capitalist society, the more insidious and invidious are its forms of oppression with their concomitant destruction of the subject of experience. I argue that at stake for Benjamin and Adorno are two radically opposed notions of temporality and history, an ontological, future oriented one and a political one oriented to the past for the sake of the present or, more precisely, for the sake of actively resisting the persistent barbarism at the heart of culture, even in the face of near-despair about the effectiveness of such resistance.

I orient the discussion with a brief analysis of the way in which Benjamin's generally neglected "Theologico-Political Fragment" underlines the nihilism constitutive of modern philosophy of history and modern politics in order to outline the consequences of this insight through a preliminary analysis of Benjamin's repeated claim in the "Theses on the Concept of History" that even the dead are not safe from the threat of further annihilation. Against the philosophy of history, including not only historicism but also vulgar Marxism, whose promise of happiness or redemption (purportedly *this-worldly*) is oriented by and toward fulfillment in the future, Benjamin insists that the striving against oppression must be "nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren." I deliberately frame the discussion of history and politics in terms of the "Theologico-Political Fragment" against the general philosophical tendency to orient Benjamin's theologico-political analysis of politics as violence in terms of the "Critique of Violence," ignoring the "Fragment" or, worse still, reading it through a Pauline lens.⁴ The experience of history as violence and of the philosophy of history as its justification gain further urgency in Benjamin's reflections on the possibility of experience, the *sine qua non* condition of breaking the spell of historical necessity, exploding its promise of redemption as threat to the living. History as violent

⁴ See, e.g., Agamben, *State of Exception*, and Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*.

threat and late capitalist society as catastrophic annihilation of the subject also constitute the continuity and affinity between Marx, Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno.

That the question of the philosophy of history is a question at once political and aesthetic is central to rethinking the relation between Benjamin's works and those of Horkheimer and Adorno from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on. It is also the critical response and radical resistance to political theology. That is, insofar as the materialist orientation to the past, the confrontation with its violence, is bodily or sensible, it is indeed aesthetic. Most succinctly stated, against the Kantian transcendental subject, for the historical materialist, the subject of experience is the vulgar embodied subject or the subject who can experience a threat, the subject who can suffer and can be exterminated. Continuing the critical reevaluation of the prevalent view of Adorno as a theoretical mandarin and of the exchanges between Benjamin and Adorno as antagonistic, I argue that such views are undialectical and hence fail to understand Adorno's writings as forms of active resistance to barbarism not only in its obvious fascist forms but, more important, in the insidious form of facile and unthinking actionism. Through analyses of some of his late radio addresses, especially "The Meaning of Working through the Past" and "Education after Auschwitz," in the latter part of the chapter, I argue that, especially in these works, Adorno explicitly engages in a critique of a culture and a politics oriented to the future, or more precisely, to overcoming the past. For Adorno, as for Benjamin, the promise of future happiness is predicated upon the destruction or repression of memory whereby "the murdered are to be cheated of the single remaining thing that our powerlessness can offer them: remembrance."⁵ Read historically, Adorno's later works make amply evident the duplicitous irony of the claims of Modernity: the inauguration of the modern subject of freedom, whose claim to autonomy is based upon a freedom of the will independent of (ecclesiastico) political institutions/material conditions, is confronted by progressively oppressive, apparently

⁵ Adorno, "Meaning of Working through the Past," in *Critical Models*, 91.

rational, material conditions/institutions authorized by it. Thus, if modernity inaugurates the modern subject, it is no exaggeration to characterize the crisis of modernity as the progressive annihilation of the subject, that is, the self, beginning with reification and culminating in the destruction of memory and impossibility of experience.

I can now make good the seemingly exaggerated claim throughout the book that the scholarship on Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno ignores history. Since there can be little doubt that significant scholarship is devoted to situating each of them historically, what is at stake, in my view, is what we mean by materialist history and the manner in which, and extent to which, the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history are, respectively, the history of the victors and its justification, both of which determine the manner of their transmission as necessary. Returning to my introductory desideratum, to brush history against the grain, then, is to render the past unnecessary. However important and interesting the chronology of events may be, to understand Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno as historical materialists is to understand religion/ideology as material conditions of oppression, immanent critique as practice. More important, to brush history against the grain is also to read history against its dogmatic appropriations, to retrieve other readings, other traditions. Or differently stated, to understand materialist history dialectically is to understand it a-teleologically. Or again, to understand history materially is to expose all teleology as theology. Thus, indeed, to understand Marx's radical critique of Hegel's political philosophy is to challenge Hegel's readings of Spinoza with an other reading of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. To understand Benjamin's critique of the philosophy of history is first to understand his "Theologico-Political Fragment." In both cases, the critique of the philosophy of history and the politics entailed by it exposes it as disguised theology.

While it will be naively ahistorical to claim that there is no difference between Marx's, Benjamin's, or Adorno's earlier and later writings, it is equally naive and ahistorical to claim that there is no development from their (or any other thinker) earlier

to later writings. The question, then, is not the development of their thought but rather the claims (implicit or explicit) of radical shifts, that is, overcoming of the earlier thoughts by the later ones.⁶ Against this Hegelian understanding of dialectics, that is, the view that understands dialectics as a rational progression, once again I propose a materialist reading according to which earlier writings are not overcome by later reconciliations of the real and the rational but rather that “progressively” discloses the irrationality of what is taken to be real/necessary. Again, it cannot be overemphasized that earlier engagements with Idealist and Romantic thinkers not only generate later thought but are returned to again and again because they persist as the deformed, uncritical beliefs of the present. For, however, repulsive this claim may be, there is a relation, even if perverse, between Kant’s disdain for vulgar experience and the vulgar coldness of authoritarians.

Insofar as my claims to the affinity between Benjamin and Adorno on praxis and history rest upon my view of their relation and affinity to Marx, a brief excursus into Marx’s understanding of critique and history is called for. I begin with a startling quotation whose brevity is a distillation of my extended introduction to this chapter about the relation between the theology/philosophy of history and the practice of critique:

The criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism.⁷

Insofar as religion is the psychic expression of real material suffering, even if the solace it provides is an illusory one, it is nonetheless a form of a protesting consciousness (which may be equally regressive as progressive). That is why indeed there can be no critique of politics that is not at the same time a critique of religion.

⁶ For a good overview of the debates about the early and later Marx, see Cowling’s “Alienation in the Older Marx.” The preeminent proponent of the view of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History” as a mature overcoming of his earlier commitment to Marxist historical materialism is Gershom Scholem. See Scholem, *On Jews*, 172–97, and Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*.

⁷ Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 53.

Our motto must therefore be: Reform of consciousness not through dogma but through analyzing the mystical consciousness which is unclear to itself, whether it appears in religious or political form. Then it will transpire that the world has long been dreaming of something that it can acquire if only it becomes conscious of it. It will transpire that it is not a matter of drawing a great dividing line between past and future but of carrying out the thoughts of the past. And finally, it will transpire that mankind begins no new work, but consciously accomplishes its old work.⁸

As later for Benjamin and especially Adorno, then, so for Marx, the past is never really past.

Insofar as the “mystical consciousness” can appear either in a religious or political form, it is clear that there is no difference in kind between the critique of religion and that of ideology. Moreover, despite the prevailing beliefs that the critique of religion can overcome the need for religion and that alienation in the primary sense is the alienation of labor, in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx makes explicitly manifest the inseparable relation between the alienation of consciousness and economic alienation. Religion is nothing but the subjective expression of objective conditions.

Religious estrangement as such occurs only in the realm of *consciousness*, of man’s inner life, but economic estrangement is that of *real life*; its transcendence therefore embraces both aspects.⁹

Explicitly stated, then, unless economic estrangement is overcome, unless the objective conditions change, no critique suffices for overcoming the alienation of consciousness. Paradoxically, for Marx, unless the objective conditions are absolutely dehumanizing, consciousness remains alienated. For, only were the subject really independent, only were the subject the abstract universal subject of metaphysics even in its materialist form (Feuerbach) rather than a social product, can she change the objective

⁸ Marx, “For a Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing,” in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 15.

⁹ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Selected Writings*, 89. My emphases.

conditions. Insofar as the thought of the past is determined by its material persistence in the present, the claims for thought's independence of the past, its capacity to overcome it, is the illusion or dreaming that perpetuates suffering for the sake of future redemption. In this light, great care need be exercised in interpreting Marx's XI Thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."¹⁰ Although it is clear that the change needed is one from the dehumanized, alienated world of civil society and formal freedom to a socialized human world, it is equally clear that praxis cannot be the application of the philosophers' interpretation; nor can it be unthoughtful, for, thought/consciousness remains for Marx, the motor of humanization.

Approximately a hundred years later, precisely insofar as, and to the extent that, the dehumanizing brutality of objective conditions has become raw violence, so have the objective conditions become inaccessible, impermeable. The more the continuous victory of the victor becomes the stuff of open and triumphant propaganda, the more Benjamin and Adorno will seek to understand the mechanisms by which the destructive objective conditions have in turn destroyed the subject of experience, the subject who can become conscious or who can remember the dead.

Whereas Adorno's explicit engagement with the genealogy of the modern concept of progressive history, or the theological origin of the philosophy of history, cannot be denied, even if it is generally ignored, especially his discussions of Augustine,¹¹ Benjamin's deliberately fragmentary engagement with history, his occlusion of his primary interlocutors (albeit often by way of allusion), on one hand, deployment of theological idiom, on the other, has contributed to surprisingly ahistorical readings of his reflections on history and freedom. Moreover, and for similar reasons, most readings of Benjamin's, and indeed Adorno's, materialist critique of history ignore their shared insistence not

¹⁰ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 145.

¹¹ See, e.g., Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 147–49, 160–61; Adorno, "Progress," in *Critical Models*, 143–60.

only that the concept of the philosophy of history, as essentially progressive, is Christian but also, harking back to Marx's critique of Bauer, that it is anti-Jewish not only in its universality (the universality of the Christian subject who is the subject not only of the Christian state but also of civil society) but, more important for the present discussion, also in its "universal" breach of the Jewish prohibition against messianic thought, let alone future-oriented praxis.

Now, it is neither surprising nor unjustified that the primary focus of all readings of Benjamin's discussions of history is the "Theses on the Concept of History" and, to a lesser extent, *The Arcades Project*,¹² it is surprising, however, that the "Theologico-Political Fragment" is ignored, even if it *were* an early fragment, since numerous other writings from the same period do not suffer the same oblivious fate.¹³ Moreover, given that Benjamin is often read as a thinker oscillating between the theological and the political, understood antithetically, between Kabbalah and vulgar Marxist orthodoxy, both of which readings ironically imply a longing for material redemption, the overlooking of the "Theologico-Political Fragment" is especially striking.¹⁴ Surely, it is neither its disputed date nor its fragmentary form that condemns this text to oblivion; nor can it be its deployment of theological idiom, since the same idiom not only reappears in other works but also returns to haunt Benjamin's last encounter with theology and violence in the "Theses." This occlusion, the

¹² What a reading/readings of this text means remains at least as oblique as a reading of the "Fragment."

¹³ The dating of the "Fragment" was a matter of great dispute between Scholem and Adorno. Whereas Scholem insisted that it must have been composed in the early 1920s, Adorno insisted that it was composed in the late 1930s. Since this dispute is central to contested interpretations and misreadings of Benjamin on history and experience, I return to it later on in the chapter, in the discussion of experience.

¹⁴ The literature claiming Benjamin for either interpretation is too extensive to enumerate. For the most credible Kabbalist interpretation, see Scholem, *On Jews and Walter Benjamin*. For the repudiation of both (conciliatory) Democratic Socialism and Vulgar Marxism, see Benjamin, "Theses on the Concept of History," Theses VIII, X, XI, XII, and XIII, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4.

discomfort not only of philosophers but also of literary critics, etc., with this text demands consideration, if for no other reason than the association of the messianic with nihilism. It is my suspicion that the dis-ease generated by this strange fragment is not dissimilar to the one generated by Marx's early writings on religion, let alone "On the Jewish Question," for at least two reasons: (1) readers of Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno on the Left, and especially philosophers (i.e., the majority of readers), do their best to avoid religious language, pretending to forget, or forgetting, Marx's own engagement or relegating it to an early phase of his thought, allegedly radically distinct from his critique of ideology and political economy; (2) both Marx's text and Benjamin's texts demand of the reader exceptional care in order to distinguish between the critique and the view critiqued, a care that is rarely exercised. That is why Marx is suspected of antisemitism and Benjamin of mysticism. Irrespective, associating Marx with religion, one is made to feel as if indeed she has violated an academic taboo, has committed a significant breach of tact.

Let me remark first on the fact that the ignoring of the "Theologico-Political Fragment," of its genealogical relation to Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*, is an evasion of the historical matter of thinking inherited by Benjamin, an evasion that led me earlier to characterize readings of Benjamin as ahistorical, and as such clearly also apolitical. Briefly but explicitly stated, it is my claim that in this succinctly oblique, perhaps esoteric, and certainly idiosyncratic piece, Benjamin deploys Spinoza against Spinozism at the same time as he responds to Kant's rejection of Spinozism, let alone Spinoza.¹⁵ To ignore this "Fragment" is to ignore the specific, concrete material context, of which the most explosive focus is teleology. Moreover, although admittedly Spinoza's name never appears in the text (only Bloch's name does), no educated reader of Benjamin (at least in Germany at the

¹⁵ A discussion of Kant's explicit silence and implicit rejection of Spinoza is clearly beyond the confines of this book. Nonetheless, Kant's indirect engagement with the Spinoza controversy is evident in all of his political writings, especially his polemical exchanges with Herder, his former student, and a self-proclaimed Spinozist. Compare [Chapter 1](#).

time) could possibly miss the all too obvious allusion to Spinoza's *Theologico-political Treatise* – a treatise in which the critique of teleology is central – in the title. I would like to further suggest that its fragmentary form is a deliberate undoing of the “systematic” readings of Spinoza's work presented by the Spinozists, especially Hegel and Schelling in the *Freiheitschrift*.

II. Benjamin on Redemption as Violence

Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope.¹⁶

This line ends Benjamin's essay on Goethe, who, even in the heat of the Spinoza Controversy, “shamelessly” identified himself as a Spinozist, as did Hegel, Schelling, Hölderlin, Herder, and so on. And it is my claim here that the “Theologico-Political Fragment” is a deliberate intervention in the violent appropriation of Spinoza's work into a Christian framework, a framework that, in the context of the philosophy of history, inserts into Spinoza's thought the two originary prejudices, indeed superstitions, against which Spinoza's entire work, culminating with the TTP, is composed, namely, teleology and free will. No thinker before or even after Spinoza has devoted as much effort to a radical theologico-political critique of these concepts, which, according to Spinoza, are the fictive, occluded origin of all normative, and thus potentially repressive, categories. Translated into politics, teleology is sustained by hope and fear, the primary sources of “good” and “evil,” the passions to which religion and ideology are addressed. This *late* intervention into the Spinozist Controversy, which seeks to expose the Christian origin of the philosophy of history and modern politics as oppressive and tending to nihilism, brief and obscure as it may be, follows both Marx and Nietzsche, whose own debt to Spinoza is also generally ignored.

¹⁶ Benjamin, “Goethe's Elective Affinities,” in *Selected Writings*, 1:297–360, esp. 356. “Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns Hoffnung gegeben” (Benjamin, *Illuminationem*, 135). This long study was written in 1919–20 and published in 1924–25 in *Neue Deutsche Beiträge*.

What in Spinoza's works begins with the Appendix to *Ethics* I¹⁷ and is developed in painstaking detail in the TTP, Benjamin captures or "crystallizes into a monad" (Thesis xvii) in the "Fragment," distilled into two short paragraphs, followed by a final sentence that exposes as nihilistic world politics, that is, the philosophy of history as the striving for the fulfillment of historico-political progress, especially its reduction of happiness into metaphysical freedom. Now, whereas the Messiah never explicitly appears in Spinoza's TTP, whose concern is strictly *salus publica*, commonwealth, or for which "salvation" is the saving (healing) of politics from religion, Benjamin's intervention makes evident the violence of the messianic insertion into history and politics. In fact, nowhere is Benjamin's deployment of religious language more materialist than in the insistence on the original biblical meaning of the Messiah whose future kingdom, at the end of days, that is, of history, ushers the perpetual peace in which place and time, nature and history, are finally reconciled. And, this reconciliation of which eternal happiness consists, is the repudiation, and denigration of transient worldly existence in its totality. The obliqueness of this "Fragment" notwithstanding, nowhere is Benjamin more explicit about the violence at the heart of the progressive history that informs Kant's hopeful wish for the reconciliation of goal and end, of freedom and happiness. Moreover, the "Fragment" makes vividly "present" Hegel's attempted rationalization of theologico-historico-political violence, as nothing other than attempted justifications of Divine violence, especially when the divine is understood in normative terms. And it is deeply ironic that the reduction of goal (*Ziel*) and end (*Ende*), the understanding of happiness as salvation, in the end amounts to the renunciation, for the sake of eternal salvation, of the world of profane politics as merely destructive, the world in which not only suffering but also happiness is a

¹⁷ The Appendix to *Ethics* I presents a succinct but radical critique of teleology and free will, especially divine will, which Spinoza views as the two originary prejudices, in fact, superstitions. For Spinoza's critique and its subsequent influence, see Dobbs-Weinstein, "Power of Prejudice."

matter of thoughtful praxis, thus condemning the world to an “eternal” destitution. The irony is all the more poignant because of its purportedly secular philosophical rather than theological origins. Understood in this light, Hegelian dialectics is a deliberate overcoming of the irreducible tension between Augustinian salvation and Aristotelian political *eudaimonia*. It is “thought” of profane history, thought about the unbearable brutality of the story of progress, that finally accomplishes thought’s final separation from praxis.

In an explicitly poignant manner, but still importantly in a crystallized fragmentary form, in the first thesis, “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin returns to the complicity between the philosophy of history, the justification of the history of the victors, and theology, precisely in its oblivion. The illusion of the absolute necessity of the puppet’s victory is predicated upon a forgetting of the contingency of play, let alone fair play governed by agreed upon rules, rules in virtue of which players are engaged in a common practice, that is, practice informed by thought. That the “player” is a puppet, a manipulated object is no accident; it does not think, nor does it really play.¹⁸ That the author of the necessity of victory is a little hunchback is equally necessary; for, according to Benjamin, the hunchback is “the prototype of distortion, the form which things assume in oblivion.”¹⁹ So long as the relation between world history and theology remains forgotten, so long as its memory is rendered impossible by the victors, the bearers of history would remain equally puppet-like, without memory or experience, that is, things rather than subjects incapable even of experiencing present oppression as imminent threat. To combat the victors is to remember the conditionality of victory, a material, historical conditionality that requires the deployment of the hidden origin of its power, an origin which is

¹⁸ Insofar as the aim is victory rather than good play, whatever “thought” may be said to govern it, it would be strictly instrumental. This is central for understanding the difference between actionism and praxis. The former is like “production,” whose aim is external to the activity, the latter is like action, whose end is intrinsic, that is, good action. See *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.

¹⁹ Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” in *Selected Writings*, 2.2:806–12.

forgotten first and foremost by the victor himself. For, were the victor to remember its own contingency, it would destroy itself as victor. To remember, then, is the task of the historical materialist precisely because the vanquished, whose task it really would have been, could only accomplish it retroactively – if only they could be rescued from the oblivion to which they are consigned by “necessity” – the only liberation possible for the dead. That is why the only hope is for the little ones without hope, for those forgotten to the history of hope in the future.²⁰

What is especially striking in Benjamin’s struggle against oblivion/forgetting in the “Theses” is the manner in which his deployment of theology against historicism is coupled with his deployment of Marx, or the way in which he makes theology the handmaiden of Marx. Against Kant’s disdain for vulgar experience, Benjamin quotes Hegel’s explicitly theological recovery of the vulgar, in order to turn upside down Hegel’s own understanding of Spirit. Thesis IV is introduced by the following quotation: “Seek for food and clothing first, then the Kingdom of God shall be added unto you. – Hegel, 1807.”²¹ The deployment of Hegel against Kant here is clearly the conscious retrieving of theology from its occlusion in Kant.²² Understood in the context of matter and spirit, of vanquished and victor, it is not surprising that the vanquished, the forgotten, are the dead in more significant ways than the literally dead, the buried or burned, or the dead who accord with the pastness of the past of linear historical time. Indeed, this is the primary reason for the “secret agreement between past generations and the present one,” in Thesis II,²³ and why the class struggle is the struggle of vanquished against victor. Against oppression and destitution and, more important,

²⁰ Among these are the distorted, deformed, discarded “entities,” such as Odradek and the little Hunchback, of folk tradition, German as well as Jewish. See Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” 2.2:811–12.

²¹ Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History,” 4:390.

²² Recall that Kant’s occlusion coupled with the disdain for vulgar experience results in a far more insidious antisemitism than any of its previous explicit theological forms discussed in [Chapter 1](#).

²³ Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History,” 4:390.

against the claims to future redemption, as the complement of crude, material need in Thesis IV Benjamin conjures as spiritual clearly *practical powers*, “courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude,” indisputably practical virtues/powers whose “retroactive force <will> constantly call[s] in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.”²⁴ This is the retroactive power to which the historical materialist can lay claim, the retroactive power of memory of the oppressed.

In Benjamin’s interpretation of history the capacity for remembering is the unique power of the historical materialist, a power generated in/by danger. Rather than being a power of a preexisting Cartesian subject who can recall at will (criticized at length by Spinoza) the subject who may remember is the subject who can experience a threat, a subject not yet destroyed by complicity with the victor. Thus understood, the power of the historical materialist is the “weak messianic power” of the oppressed, who may at any moment be overcome or lost to history

Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling class.²⁵

Although it is not made explicit in the “Theses,” the question of the possibility of experience is central to understanding the imminent danger found in most of the theses. In fact, it is my claim that the unique power of the historical materialist, her “weak messianic power,” is the capacity for experience, which experience is predicated upon memory. To claim that even the dead are not safe from the enemy if he wins is to say that the living are threatened by annihilation. The power/weight of tradition when the tradition is the necessary determination of the victors, that is, when it demands conformity, is the power of a prohibition against thinking otherwise. The danger of becoming a tool of the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 4:391.

ruling class is the danger of becoming the puppet, a thing among things, rather than a subject who can experience.

Part II. The Possibility of Experience

I. Concrete Experience as the Capacity to Experience a Threat

In “The Integrity of the Intellectual: In Memory of Walter Benjamin,” first presented in a colloquium on Benjamin held in Frankfurt on July 1982, Leo Löwenthal expresses a powerful affect arising from a rereading of Benjamin’s writings almost forty-two years after his death. Since approximately thirty-two years after Löwenthal first expressed it and seventy-two years following Benjamin’s death, I experience a similar powerful affect upon rereading both Benjamin’s and Adorno’s writings, all the more intensely in the current political climate, I will let its original expression set the tone for my discussion of the possibility of experience then and now. Drawing upon the image ending Benjamin’s essay on surrealism (written in 1929), which presents “an alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds,” Löwenthal states, “As I studied his work *once again*, it seemed indeed as if a clock was incessantly sounding an alarm: Benjamin’s *immediacy today* set off uninterrupted *shocks* in my mind and demanded constant alertness.”²⁶ Benjamin’s prophetic voice eighty-five years after its first pronouncement not only “still sets off uninterrupted shocks” – violent bodily experiences thematized by Benjamin and setting into new relief the insidious persistence of barbarism and its imminent danger, later repeated by Adorno – but also does so with a deafening ring, which ring remains largely unheard or is misheard as a utopian sounding of revolutionary possibility.

Since both Adorno and Löwenthal emphasize the transition from an initial belief in the power of the cunning of “spirit” to overcome the prevailing forces contradictory to Spirit (or

²⁶ Löwenthal, “Integrity of the Intellectual,” 247. My emphases.

Enlightenment) to the recognition of Spirit's impotence against objective material forces shared by the Jewish émigrés,²⁷ since claims to Benjamin's utopian aspirations can only be maintained (even if contentiously) about those of his works that seem to be unconcerned with history or to suspend the materialist commitment to it, and since I wish to avoid further polemics to the extent possible, I shall limit my consideration of the possibility of experience to "vulgar" experience (*Erfahrung*), that experience disdained by Kant, as distinct from transcendental, speculative, or "lived" experience (*Erlebnis*).²⁸ In addition, before proceeding, it cannot be overemphasized that both Löwenthal and Adorno characterize the shared experience of disillusionment and critical responses to it as specifically Jewish. At present, all too briefly and enigmatically stated, suffice it to state that this is a "Jewish experience" in the precise sense that it originates in the distinction between law and justice lost to bourgeois Enlightenment in the decidedly Christian, Modern nation-state, a distinction that both predates Enlightenment and is explicitly retrieved by Marx's critical evaluation of the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" in "On the Jewish Question."²⁹ This emphasis upon the Jewish "origin" of the concrete, material, that is, historical, disillusionment with the power of Spirit and its critique does not signify some generic conceptual claim about "Jews" as such, a quality shared by an abstract people or even a single generation, nor require membership in a particular community, except perhaps for "the community of unbelievers who leave heaven to the angels and the sparrows," whose modern forebear

²⁷ *Ibid.* Benjamin's untimely timeliness is likewise emphasized by Adorno in "On Benjamin's *Deutsche Menschen*, a Book of Letters," in *Notes to Literature*, 2:328–33.

²⁸ Peter Osborne's translation of *Erlebnis* by "living through," as distinct from *Erfahrung*, or "experience" historical, aesthetic, revolutionary, reflects well my insistence on separating the former, which harbor transcendental, speculative, or ontological connotations, and the latter, which is historical, material, political. See Osborne, "Small Scale Victories." It is important to note that my claim to agreement here extends only to the translation of Benjamin's specific deployment of the term *Erfahrung* rather than to its subsequent critical deployment by Benjamin.

²⁹ See the discussion of "On the Jewish Question" in [Chapter 2](#).

is Spinoza.³⁰ Understood from this perspective, Aristotle's ethics/politics, his distinction between legal justice and equity in *Nicomachean Ethics* 5, is also Jewish.³¹ And, it is my claim that, insofar as this Jewish experience is historically specific, it is vulgar experience, precisely that experience that Kant refuses to acknowledge in his insistence on the progressive improvement of mankind, a refusal that, insofar as its Christian origin remains unacknowledged, not only continues to sustain the barbarism at the heart of culture but also continues to be uncritically or antiphilosophically amazed "that the things we are experiencing are still possible [today]."³²

³⁰ See Freud's allusion to Spinoza through a citation of Heine's poem, "*Deutschland*" at the end of chapter 9 of *Future of an Illusion*. And, see Martin Jay, "The Jews and the Frankfurt School," and Dobbs-Weinstein, "Whose History?" Martin Jay's study of the transformation in the attitude of School members toward antisemitism is a valuable resource for locating the transformation historically, even though I differ from his reading of Marx's attitude toward antisemitism (with which I strongly disagree), adherence to which serves as his explanation for the "early" attitude and his reductive psychological explanation of Adorno's later attitude. Rather, as material conditions changed, so did attitudes.

³¹ Equity concerns precisely the unique and singular or what is always in excess of the universal or identical. In that sense, equity is an in[de]finite correction of the universal, the totality.

³² Paraphrase of Benjamin's Thesis VII, in *Selected Works*, 4:392. As will become evident in what follows, this "amazement" is not only "not philosophical," it is antiphilosophical, constituting as it does a resistance to critique or critical reflection. More important, this trenchant "amazement" is not limited to the "men in the crowd," nor to "politicians." The censorship implicit in such a comportment is also at home in the academy, especially among those committed to a progressive view of history. At present, one concrete recent example should suffice: very recently, in the late fall semester 2012, the Vanderbilt Faculty Council and the associate dean responsible for undergraduate education attempted to censor the brief catalog description of my new course (approved by the curriculum committee) "Contemporary Jewish Philosophy: Specters of Auschwitz." The resistance, wholeheartedly shared by the dean, who is a sociologist, was explicitly articulated as "this implies that barbarism is at the heart of all cultures. This cannot be true." And this is expressed at a secular, top-rated research university in an America that recently debated whether waterboarding is torture, in a state that recently reinstituted the electric chair as an acceptable means of execution of those condemned to capital punishment and whose legislators want to legislate the teaching of "creationism" alongside evolution in high school science classes, etc.

Ironically, Benjamin's "prophetic voice" is still untimely despite its urgency then and now and despite Adorno's intensified focus on it in his later writings, which writings unflinchingly return to an other "aesthetic experience," an other history. As Thesis VIII makes evident, which evidence is cited years later by Adorno, this amazement is not philosophical precisely in the sense that it is uncritical. "This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable,"³³ or is the distortion produced by oblivion. Ironically, the insistence upon an other view of history, an a-teleological view, the return to the concrete, the vulgar, embodied aesthetic experience, is for both Benjamin and Adorno the only possibility of "real" experience if and to the extent that it is experienced as shock; for it is experience as shock that *may* still compel a self-conscious critical response, may shock the reified subject into existence. The concern with the possibility of experience as shock is a concern in the face of the evidence that most individuals, not only the authoritarians and desktop murderers but also the men in the crowd, have been inured to such experience.

Insofar as the messianic specter hovers over Benjamin's writings, insofar as the question of Benjamin's historical materialism has occasioned the most extensive misreadings, that is, resistance to a view that cannot be forced into some "philosophically" or "theologically" familiar model, and insofar as *jetzzeit* is the term or "concept" that provides the focus or pretext for many of the misreadings, a brief analysis of the dialectical tension between *jetzzeit* and universal or messianic history is necessary for undoing the teleology implicit in most readings of Benjamin. First and foremost, it is important to note not only that Benjamin's deploys *jetzzeit* against the grain but also that he does so in a manner such that the immediacy of the prophetic in-sight is an insight into the past that transforms the pastness of the past into an experience of danger now. Succinctly stated, Benjamin's *jetzzeit* is not only a-teleological but also and decisively anti-teleological, exploding

³³ Benjamin, *Selected Works*, 4:392.

the promise of future happiness as fraud. For, with respect to teleology, there is little to distinguish between a theological (messianic) understanding of history and a vulgar Marxist one, except nominally. Against both the transcendent and historicist views of history for which the now is either presence to a subject or mere, unmediated “objective” passage, both of which are undialectical, Benjamin deploys a notion of the “now” that presents what is not otherwise present, what is not recognized by the present as such, as a singular constellation, a breach of the present experienced as shock, exposing traces or images of the past erased by homogenous, linear time. Most succinctly stated, the question of the now of history and politics and the question of shock as aesthetic experience are dialectically intertwined. As will become evident, the very question of Modernity for both Benjamin and Adorno, its aesthetic and political categories, will depend upon what we understand by history.

Before proceeding to a reconsideration of Benjamin’s indebtedness to Surrealism, which will make possible a further clarification of the difference between the dream image and the dialectical image, and shed further light on Benjamin’s and Adorno’s correspondence on the Baudelaire writings discussed in [Chapter 4](#), I turn briefly to the reported disagreement between Adorno and Scholem on the dating of the “Theologico-Political Fragment” in order to bring into sharp relief the difference between the Modern as the ever-same and as avant-garde, or the tension between newness and lateness central to the understanding of experience as bodily shock in both Benjamin and Adorno. Ironically, the disagreement about the dating of this very short fragment exposes a much deeper abyss between the two unmediated rival claims to Benjamin’s intellectual heritage, the Jewish and the Marxist. And, it is my claim that Adorno attempts to mediate this relation by wresting the “Jewish” and the “Marxist” free of discipleship, free of the worn-out cliché of Athens or Rome and Jerusalem, free of truth as a- or extrahistorical.³⁴

³⁴ The vehemence with which Adorno is attacked for preventing the publication of some of Benjamin’s writings is exemplary of such discipleship. Even though

Evidence to the disagreement between Scholem and Adorno is found in the editors' note to the version of the "Fragment" in the *Selected Writings*, vol. 3 (1935–38), a dating that immediately makes evident the editors' judgment in the dispute. The first note emphasizes the fact that both Adorno and Scholem "attached enormous importance to the text; yet, they were *adamantly* opposed in their attempts to date it."³⁵ That the nature of their opposition was not merely or pedantically philological is evident from their respective explanations of their judgments. "Scholem insisted that its ideas are consonant with Benjamin's ideas from the early 1920's; Adorno recalled that Benjamin had read the text, describing it, as the 'newest of the new,' to him and Gretel, in San Remo in late 1937 or early 1938."³⁶ In this light, the dispute can be titled "Whose Chronology, and Why?" And, it is worth recalling that Adorno's late dating of the "Fragment" situates it in the midst of the most productive (albeit misunderstood) dialectical epistolary exchanges between him and Benjamin for which paradoxically Adorno continues to be vilified, ignoring or in ignorance of the fecundity of this exchange.

Scholem's insistence on the early dating is fully consistent with his other writings on Benjamin. On his reading, not only can Benjamin's work be traced chronologically from early to late but also, and more important, the works exhibit a movement from Jewish mysticism to a vulgar Marxism and back again to its Jewish, mystical origin. This view is not dialectical, not even

Leo Löwenthal is one of those who criticized Adorno for preventing the publication of some parts of the book on Baudelaire, unlike others, he also notes, "Although Adorno's criticism upset him at first, Benjamin put it to use very productively. On the basis of the revision *suggested by Adorno*, a new, independent essay emerged, 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' which we published in 1939." Löwenthal, "Integrity of the Intellectual," 248. My emphasis. Recall that this was also the essay highly praised by Adorno in the correspondence. See [Chapter 4](#). Compare the thoroughly dogmatic reading of Adorno's criticisms of Benjamin as an instance of dogmatic Marxism of Agamben, "The Prince and the Frog," in *Infancy and History*, 107–24.

³⁵ Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," in *Selected Writings*, 3:306. My emphasis.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:305–6.

in a Hegelian mode, since there is no trace of Marxism in the purified Benjamin of the “Theses.” Why then insist on the early dating of the Fragment? Surely, not merely because of the desire to reclaim Benjamin as a Jewish philosopher. I can only hazard a guess and suggest that interpreting the “Theses” to represent a form of Jewish messianic thought is possible only on condition of reading the “Fragment” undialectically, emphasizing the theological and neutralizing its political force; subsequently this reading purges the “Theses” of all Marxist, radically materialist force. It is also a reading that, surprisingly for a historian of such a stature as Scholem’s was, depends upon the a- or even antidi-alectical decoupling of transcendent(al) theology and historical politics – originating in the forgetting of the theologico-political origins of the (philosophy of) history of progress.

Proportionately as Scholem’s reading is undialectical, so is Adorno’s reading dialectical. I would like to suggest that Adorno’s evidence to the lateness of the “Fragment” is not so much as a factual bit of information based upon the date of Benjamin’s reported assertion of its newness as a substantive one based upon what both he and Benjamin understood by the “newest of the new.” Furthermore, I would like to suggest that newest of the new, as distinct from the new, corresponds to Adorno’s category of the “late” as distinct from the Modern as the ever-same, eternal recurrence, or which is the same, presence to consciousness.

It may be objected that, at least for Adorno, “lateness” is a strictly musical, aesthetic concept and, given Adorno’s (and Benjamin’s) resistance to metaphor, cannot and should not be transferred to politics. One rather trite response to this philological objection is, so what? Orthodoxy is as far from Adorno’s theory as it is from his practice. The second, substantive response is that “lateness” is not a pure aesthetic category; rather, and as will become evident below, it is a materialist historical category that serves, quite precisely, to destroy the separation between the aesthetic and the political, restoring both to their material, concrete embodied basis. In fact, the insistence upon the radical separation between the aesthetic and the political, or

art and society, is itself a symptom of the resistance to critical self-reflection.

Against an understanding of Modernity as progress in the consciousness of freedom in which the new is the ever-same of the unity of homogeneous time, the common elixir against the terror of the alienated, isolated individual in advanced Capitalist society, Adorno presents new music not as the incomprehensible form of music of which it is accused by its critics but rather as the forceful detoxification that brings it into full relief, or “gives form to that anxiety, that terror, that insight into the catastrophic situation which others merely evade by regressing.”³⁷ Or, as Adorno notes in *Aesthetic Theory*, “chaos forgotten becomes disaster.”³⁸ It is this form of the Modern or new that elsewhere Adorno describes as late-style, a lateness that is not a matter of historical chronology; on the contrary. As he states in “Late Style in Beethoven,” “in the history of art, late works are the catastrophes.”³⁹ And, in a belated answer to Peter Suhrkamp’s question “why [he] still keep[s] talking about new music,” in “Music and the New Music,” Adorno comments that the oxymoron presented by the term *atonal* with respect to music “registers with some precision the shock waves caused by the new music. This shock was in fact an integral part of it and was moderated the instant that people began to replace atonality with twelve-note music, *as if that were a completely new musical system.*”⁴⁰ Late works are the breach in the history of progress, exploding its claims to harmony, unity, reconciliation.

But, rather than being merely failures, expressed catastrophes, fragmentary destructions of harmonic unities, *may* produce bodily shock. It is precisely this resistance to the dissolution of the tension between the messianic (perennial in art) and the historical, with its insistence on the catastrophic nature of the attempt

³⁷ Adorno, “On the Fetish Character,” in Arato and Gephardt, *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 298. See also the discussion at the end of [Chapter 4](#).

³⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 272.

³⁹ Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven,” in *Essays on Music*, 567.

⁴⁰ Adorno, “Music and the New Music,” in *Quasi Una Fantasia*, 253. My emphasis.

to establish the Kingdom of God, that is, the nihilism inherent in the politics of progress, that situates Benjamin's "Fragment" as late or the newest of the new and as companion to his "Theses." Viewed in this light, Benjamin was not a thinker vacillating between Jewish messianic mysticism and vulgar Marxism; rather, he was the thinker who relentlessly emphasized the prohibition against an understanding of revolutionary practice as the latter's actualization of the former.

II. The Debt to Surrealism: Experience as Shock

Now, it is on the understanding of experience as bodily shock, the shock that may force the subject "back again" into existence, that both Benjamin and Adorno are most indebted to Surrealism in strikingly similar ways, despite or precisely because of the fact that it is also the locus classicus of their most critical epistolary exchanges.

The extensive and intensive exchange between Benjamin and Adorno occasioned by Benjamin's deployment of Surrealist language and concepts (if one is permitted to transgressively use "concepts" here), especially the idiom of the dream and the emphasis upon intoxication read by itself, fails to appreciate either Benjamin's critical relation to Surrealism or Adorno's interest in and appreciation of *certain aspects* of Surrealism, historically understood. Benjamin's "Surrealism," the essay whose lateness still sounded an alarm to Löwenthal in 1982, is an historical, dialectical critique of Surrealism that does not resolve the tension between the anarchic and the political elements of Surrealism, or between revolt and revolution; rather, it bring this tension into sharp relief.

Benjamin emphatically denies that Surrealist writings are literature; nor, according to him, are they concerned either with theories (meaning) or with phantasm. Rather, the Surrealists were striving to give voice to living experience freed from "individuality," the self that is the moral subject of late Bourgeois custom. Benjamin is equally adamant in rejecting an interpretation of these experiences primarily as dream, or intoxication by hashish

or opium. In fact, the most intense intoxication on Benjamin's account is thoroughly sober and resolute. Neither religious nor drug-induced ecstasies serve as adequate analogies for Surrealist experiences, even if the Surrealist themselves were not always the best exemplars of the insights they uncovered or forced into view. The revolt against Catholicism loudly proclaimed by Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Appolinaire did not amount to revolution. Dialectically understood, this revolt is simply the mirror image or repetition of Catholicism rather than its dialectical overcoming, let alone destruction. On the contrary, without great care, unleashing anarchy without construction, Surrealism could have become regressive. More important, while the Surrealists were explicit in their pursuit of "profane illumination," even their best-written works, Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* and Breton's *Nadja*, fall far short of the promise of profane illumination.

As Benjamin insists, "the true creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics."⁴¹ Unlike religious ecstasy, drug-induced intoxication, or the "intoxication" of and with the Modern, creative expression, which purportedly is free of traditions, that is, the ever-same of the individual Cartesian subject, all of which seek to escape current living experience as hell, sober intoxication simultaneously explodes into sharp relief the unity of the ever-same of the subject, the myth of its autonomy, and undoes the historical necessity of the institutions that sustain present catastrophe. This is, indeed, the difference between the "illumination" of the prophet whose back, like that of the angel of history, is turned to the future and the prophet of the end of history and its anonymous bearers.⁴²

The exemplarity of intoxication with love, the originary form of which is courtly love (which is the secular face of Christian ecstatic love),⁴³ deployed by Breton in *Nadja*, makes amply

⁴¹ Benjamin, "Surrealism," in *Selected Works*, 2.1:209.

⁴² See the discussion of the "Paralipomena on the Concept of History" in [Chapter 4](#).

⁴³ The best, in fact archaic, example of courtly love literature makes evident the complicity between Christian ecstasy and a seemingly secular one. See, e.g., Capellanus, *De Amore* (1184–86).

evident that such intoxication displaces the erotic from the beloved to love, from satisfaction of desire to its deferral, from libidinal drive to its frustration. More important, Benjamin's insight into the proximity between the transgression of the ever-same evident in courtly love and in Surrealist writings is, without exaggeration, prophetic; for, in late Capitalist society, it renders visible the absence of the human subject in the beloved already anticipated in courtly love literature and intensely felt in *Nadja at the same time as* it alludes to traces of their humanity in the discarded, obsolete, outmoded objects, which traces, in fact, mark the moment of their "owners'" subjectivity. In contrast to the purported freedom from traditions of the autonomous Cartesian subject, like the collector's objects, "objects" from the past, freed from the necessity of the economy of commodity exchange, that is, freed from use value, the discarded, obsolete, no longer needed objects, objects replaced by "new" valuable, hence valued, ones, can be differently configured into possible constellations that may present revolutionary possibilities, may present a fleeting moment of subjective freedom in the midst of its glaring absence in a life lived under objective oppressive conditions. In addition, I would like to suggest that the "profane illumination" promised by the Surrealists is, for Benjamin, the illumination that the discarded objects presented the fate of the unique subject of experience now thoroughly reified and hence exchangeable or discardable, imminently threatened by annihilation. The revolt against tradition as oppressive, for Benjamin, then, must be radically transformed into revolutionary engagement with its repressed possibilities.

Before proceeding, it is important to underline the fact that, ironically, Benjamin's most poignant critique of the Surrealists focuses upon the need for construction together with destruction; destruction without construction is a hair's breadth away from regression and can be deployed in its service. The irony here is that this critique anticipates quite precisely Adorno's later critique of Benjamin's deployments of Surrealist motifs in the drafts of *The Arcades Project*, discussed in the previous chapter. To recall, in his response to Adorno, Benjamin indeed acknowledges

the danger in his epistemological “method” in which the unmediated immersion in detail, or the undoing of unity and totality, that is, the destruction, must precede the construction.

In yet another reversal of the general reductive readings of the complex dialectical relation between Benjamin and Adorno, Adorno’s very brief “Looking Back on Surrealism” can be said to be a crystallization of Benjamin’s lengthy Surrealism essay. Irrespective of length, Benjamin’s essay is a careful, critical dialectical engagement with Surrealism, whereas Adorno’s essay is almost aphoristic. More important, although Adorno nowhere mentions Benjamin in this 1956 essay, Benjamin’s influence is evident throughout, especially in the strong emphasis upon the obsolete, discarded objects as the residues of human subjects in the world of commodity fetishism, a world in which the subject of experience had been annihilated. Moreover, Adorno emphatically denies that the images encountered in Surrealist works are dream images, let alone products of the unconscious. In anticipation of his subsequent radio addresses, especially “The Meaning of Working through the Past” and “Education after Auschwitz,” Adorno stresses that “to be a mere dream always leaves reality untouched, whatever damage is done to the image.”⁴⁴ Rather than being the dream images of an unconscious, according to Adorno, the Surrealist subject directs all its energy into its own annihilation so as to bring the object into relief in its destitution. In a thoroughgoing Benjaminian idiom, Adorno describes the Surrealist image as a dialectical image and deploys the language of photography. Describing the dismembered parts of pornographic mementos of past libidinal energy, dismembered breasts and legs in silk stockings, Adorno states:

Thinglike and dead, in them what has been forgotten reveals itself to be the true object of love, what love wants to make itself resemble, what we resemble. As the freezing of the moment of awakening, Surrealism is akin to photography. Surrealism’s booty is images, to be sure, but not invariant, a-historical images of the unconscious subject to which the conventional view would like to neutralize them; rather,

⁴⁴ Adorno, “Looking Back on Surrealism,” in *Notes to Literature*, 1:87.

they are historical images in which the subject's innermost core becomes aware that it is something external, an imitation of something social and historical.⁴⁵

And,

The dialectical images of Surrealism are images of a dialectic of subjective freedom in a situation of objective unfreedom.⁴⁶

Again, against conventional wisdom, "Looking Back on Surrealism" makes amply evident the dialectical nature of the relation between Benjamin's and Adorno's work, both public and epistolary. Even were it philosophically "justified" to read the epistolary exchanges undialectically at the time of their exchange, in the historical interval it should have become clear that the critical relation was anything but one sided. Just as Benjamin's Baudelaire essay (and I would add *The Arcades Project* as a whole) benefited from Adorno's critical intervention, as Löwenthal reluctantly admits, so also did Adorno's writings benefit from these exchanges, as this brief essay makes amply evident.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:89. Adorno emphasizes the dissolution of the capacity to love as a symptom of the economy of exchange first in Part III of *Minima Moralia*, "*Ne cherchez pas mon coeur.*" Later, in "Meaning of Working through the Past," he further follows this "pathological" destruction in the psychology of the reified consciousness with its fetishization of technology. As he chillingly observes, "one who cleverly devises a train system that brings the victims to Auschwitz as quickly and smoothly as possible forgets what happens to them there. With this type . . . we are concerned – badly put, with people who cannot love." Adorno, *Critical Models*, 200. According to Adorno, this was the most important psychological condition that could have produced Auschwitz in the midst of civilization.

⁴⁶ Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism," 1:88. Viewed in this light, the dismembered "feminine" objects, especially in the form of the mannequin's silk-stockinged leg, are the inversion of "woman" as nature determined by male power/desire. For an interesting reading of Adorno and Horkheimer as *feminists avant la lettre*, see Hewitt, "A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment?" This reading provides an important insight into the relation between the Surrealism essay and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

⁴⁷ The claim that Adorno misunderstood Benjamin when he harshly criticized him for being undialectical, as it is advanced, e.g., by Howard Caygill, is undialectical in the sense that it is only post hoc on the basis of the entire *Arcades Project* coupled with Benjamin's 1938 letter to Horkheimer, in which he presents the tripartite plan for the entire project that it can be made. But

Now, although it is clear that Adorno's appreciation of the "revolutionary" potential of Surrealism is a consequence of his engagement with Benjamin's thought, precisely for concrete historical reasons, the concern with, and evaluation of, Surrealism as possessing such revolutionary potential cannot be identical to Benjamin's, especially with respect to the subject of experience. As Adorno states most poignantly, "after the European catastrophe the Surrealist shocks lost their force. It is as though they had saved Paris by preparing it for fear: the destruction of the city was their center."⁴⁸ As will become evident in the following discussion, this force will reappear in the new music, albeit in a more intense form.

III. Experience as Catastrophe: *Philosophy of New Music as Excursus to Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Adorno's and Horkheimer's concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) is as multivalent, even aporetic, as is Benjamin's. This is not surprising. As they state in the first prefaces to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,

false clarity is only another name for myth. Myth was always obscure and luminous at once. It has always been distinguished by its familiarity and its exemption from the *work of concepts*.⁴⁹

False clarity is what constitutes the unity of myth and Enlightenment; the reified concept in language and thought, which,

Adorno did not object to the project; on the contrary, he was its great advocate. Rather, Adorno objected to publishing the second part of the project independently precisely because, independently and without mediation, it violated Benjamin's rich and radical historical, dialectical materialism. See Caygill, *Walter Benjamin*, 135.

⁴⁸ Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism," 1:87. Jay Bernstein, one of the very few readers who understand the relation between Benjamin and Adorno (as well as Horkheimer) philosophically and dialectically, identifies the differences between them as ones between philosophy and cultural history in contradistinction to my insistence on the radically historical and political nature of these differences. See Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, esp. 111–20.

⁴⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii. Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 41, where Adorno states, "Direct communicability to everyone is not a criterion of truth."

in bourgeois society, demands conformity, is antagonistic to mediation and, as a political tool of domination, is enforced first by priests and then by the culture industry. Ironically, and as has been anticipated several times in the previous chapters, it is the demand for clarity as the standard of truth, a demand philosophically inaugurated by Descartes and Cartesian dualism, extended by Leibniz, and culminating in Kant, whose origin is the Renaissance mathematization of nature (against Aristotelian *metabasis*)⁵⁰ that, in the name of knowledge, undermines the possibility of critical self-reflection, and with it the possibility of experience.⁵¹

Insofar as “intellect’s true concern is the negation of reification,” and insofar as, and to the extent that conceptual language is an expression of existing social conditions, even if in opposition to them, no traditional form of philosophizing is up to the task of critique. In describing the content of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as “collected fragments,” Adorno and Horkheimer make evident their debt to Benjamin, the arche-practitioner of fragmentary writing.⁵² Against and in full acknowledgment of philosophy’s guilty complicity, dialectical thinking must not only proceed negatively from “the given” but must also be “a thinking against itself,” renouncing any possibility of reconciliation. Understood in this light, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, it is not only Benjamin but also Adorno and Horkheimer who are indebted to the Surrealist insight, albeit in a materialist critical and very sober manner. Adorno’s “[A] Portrait of Walter

⁵⁰ See [Chapter 1](#).

⁵¹ The mediated nature of “experience” cannot be overemphasized. It is for this reason that what is taken to be experience by empiricism is no different in kind than the “experience” of rationalism and Idealism precisely because, in its pretense to transparency and immediacy, it is a projection of a neutral, disembodied subject. As has been noted in [Chapter 1](#), this is an ironic mark of the “translation” of Greek, especially Aristotelian “*empeiria*,” to Modern empiricism made possible through the mathematization of all science from the Renaissance forth against the Aristotelian prohibition against *metabasis*.

⁵² Benjamin’s interest in fragmentary writings can be traced back to his discussion of the dialectical relation between Baroque tragic drama and the Romantic theory of allegory. See Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, esp. “Allegory and Trauespiel.”

Benjamin” can be as aptly applied to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as his subsequent works insofar as they are fragmentary works that eschew the traditional form of philosophical writings.

It is no exaggeration to claim that, when Adorno states that Benjamin “had nothing of the philosopher in the traditional sense,”⁵³ and that he developed a philosophy directed against philosophy,⁵⁴ he is signaling that Benjamin’s works are new or belated philosophy at the very least in the sense that, rather than discarding the old, they transform it into the new, a transformation that emphatically (and, if I may, empathically) insists upon the primacy of the object. Moreover, nowhere is the legacy of Benjamin more evident than in Adorno’s reflection on Benjamin’s late style than in the claim that “between myth and reconciliation, the poles of his philosophy, the subject evaporates.”⁵⁵ Understood in this light, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* pursues the critical path(s) first paved by Benjamin in a more radical way owing to the concrete, material historical forms of a barbarism beyond Benjamin’s critical experience and, hence, representability. And here, I wish to recall that Adorno ends the preface to *Philosophy of New Music* by situating it as a new or additional excursus to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As he states:

this book should be understood as a detailed excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. What bears witness to it as steadfastness, to confidence in the helping strength of determinate negation, is thanks to the intellectual solidarity of Max Horkheimer.⁵⁶

Just like the other excursi in which the critique of Enlightenment (and progress) is a dialectic between Enlightenment and myth, bringing into relief the objective unfreedom concurrent with the myth of progress in the subject’s freedom, or indefinite choice provided by the culture industry, in order to undermine,

⁵³ Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” in *Prisms*, 229.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 5. The preface was written in Los Angeles and is dated July 1, 1948.

to the extent possible, admittedly small, its exploitation for legitimating the status quo, so here the dialectical tension between Schoenberg's and Stravinsky's "new music" remains unreconciled. Moreover, the steadfast refusal of reconciliation between the two "protagonists" presenting the "extremes" of new music is explicitly informed by Benjamin's procedure in the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, a citation from which opens the introduction to *Philosophy of New Music*. Following Benjamin's presentation of the form that "philosophical history as the research of origin" must take, Adorno states:

The principle that Walter Benjamin followed in his treatise on the German drama of lamentation, for reasons relating to *the critique of knowledge*, can be grounded in the object itself in a philosophical analysis of new music that is essentially restricted to its two protagonists, who have no direct relation with each other. For only in the extremes does the essence of this music take shape distinctly; only they permit knowledge of its truth content.⁵⁷

Adorno immediately identifies this principle as one also informing Schoenberg's "Three Satires for Mixed Chorus," Opus 28, 1–3, in the forward to which Schoenberg states that "the middle road . . . is the only one that does not lead to Rome."⁵⁸ Read in the light of *Philosophy of New Music*, the second excursus of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can gain sharper focus in the dialectic between Kant and Sade, between transcendently deduced subjective freedom and moral agency and objective unfreedom of

⁵⁷ Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, "Introduction," 7. My emphasis. This claim puts into question Hullot-Kentor's expressed reservation about the status of the *Philosophy of New Music* as an excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the grounds that they were written several years apart, with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* having been written in the intervening years. More important, philosophically, while the language of the "ever-same" and "domination" takes precedence in this text to the language of "myth" and enlightenment, the latter are far from absent in this work. In fact, the last pages of *Philosophy of New Music* are indeed and explicitly concerned with regression/myth and enlightenment. The ever-same and domination (of nature or of the subject) are the more precise terms that myth and enlightenment take in an inquiry into the form of *neue musik*.

⁵⁸ Ibid. "Introduction," 7. My emphasis.

moral decay, in the wake of the annihilation of the subject. That Sade is a precursor of the Surrealists in the revolt against Christianity as well as Kantian morality needs little argument, I hope.

In the light of Adorno's explicit claim about the status of *Philosophy of New Music*, I suggest that this book stands in the same dialectical relation to "Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as "Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment" stands to "The Concept of Enlightenment," which is [Chapter 1](#), and that "Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality" stands to "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," which is [Chapter 4](#).⁵⁹ The radical juxtaposition in a dialectic of extremes that do not touch inaugurated by Benjamin's *Trauspiel* and informing both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Philosophy of New Music* simultaneously undermines Hegelian dialectics and, more important, undoes any linear view of history in which discontinuity imminently threatens all pretension to continuity. What is unique to music and "justifies" the deployment of the language of new and late style, according to Adorno, is the manner in which it explodes any pretense to continuity, even or especially when it deploys elements of the old, of tradition. As he argues:

it is no accident that the epithet "new" has survived in music and not in painting. It marks the fact of an abrupt, qualitative leap, whereas analogous changes in painting are distributed over a longer period of time. Even in its most recent development music has proved to be a belated art, a "latecomer" who runs through the different phases all the more briskly. But the prime fact about the new music was that it signaled a change in the tonal system.⁶⁰

Against an understanding of this qualitative leap as a Hegelian overcoming that will incorporate new music into a unified

⁵⁹ I shall comment on the status of "Notes and Sketches" later. For now suffice it to point out that I view these disperse and disparate fragments to stand in a similar relation to the negative dialectics carried out in the book as the fragments that constitute "Meditations on Metaphysics" stand to the rest of *Negative Dialectics*. These are, to borrow a medieval legal description, *extravagantes*.

⁶⁰ Adorno, "Music and New Music," 251.

historicist continuity, Adorno underscores the fact that the repulsion or horror occasioned by the so-called atonal new music is based upon the illusion produced and maintained by the hegemony of the culture industry that tonality is natural rather than being the product of a long historical process. As he points out, to contemporary ears, the early music is equally unnatural and alien. Moreover, the illusion of naturalness is a manifestation of the rejection of history, of vulgar experience, the experience of the pervasive, persistent, and terrifying irrationality of the modern world, by the transcendental rational subject. But, it is precisely this illusion that the new music aims to shatter. For “the substance of the new music is determined to a certain extent by its hostility toward the administered society.”⁶¹ Like the collector’s artworks and Surrealist “productions,” the new music is not only devoid of use value but also an uprising against the economy of usefulness. It is not surprising, however, that as a radical historical materialist, when Adorno draws an analogy between the destructive energy that the new music discharges against established norms and that of the Surrealists, he is restricting the analogy to Surrealist writings, writings that are “not literature” as Benjamin observed. What they share is a tone of menace, panic, catastrophe. Carrying the claim about the Surrealist preparation of Paris for fear further in the light of the changed historical circumstances, Adorno states:

The tone of the New Music expresses its horror that *even fear* is no longer able to intervene between the subject and what is done to him; that destiny has become monstrous and overwhelming. Only through the *imageless* image of dehumanization can this music retain hold on the image of humanity.⁶²

The quintessential example of such practice singled out by Adorno is John Cage’s Piano Concerto, a “concerto” that “makes sense” of the destruction of the subject of experience. As *Negative Dialectics* makes evident, with the liquidation of the subject

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 256. My emphases.

of experience, the subject for whom death is a termination of life, the subject of death has also been destroyed in Auschwitz.

That in the concentration camp it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen – this is a fact bound to affect the dying of those who escaped the administrative measure.⁶³

Further exploding the horror of this “historical transformation,” a couple of fragments later (and against Heidegger), Adorno states:

In the camps death has a *novel* horror [*neues Grauen*]; since Auschwitz fearing death means fearing worse than death.⁶⁴

Ironically, according to Adorno, in inhabiting the horror, in exploding it into sharp relief, in depriving it of any meaning whatsoever, the new music “redeems the precept of autonomy.” I would like to suggest that Benjamin’s “Theses” as well as Adorno’s work from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on are the newest of the new, a *novel* or belated form of a historical materialist philosophy in just this way. They are indeed fragmentary, menacing works written in the face of despair and in its defiance. Understood in this light, unlike Surrealist revolt, late works, musical as well as philosophical, harbor within them a spark, however weak, of revolutionary, or, if you wish, utopian or messianic, possibility.

The difference between revolt and revolution, both at the individual and at the societal level, can be initially captured by the psychoanalytic distinction between acting out against repression and working through repression, being forced to reexperience a forgotten past and, if possible, undoing its necessity and thereby perhaps breaking its spell on the present.⁶⁵ Properly understood, the weak revolutionary spark that shock may, perhaps, produce

⁶³ Adorno, “After Auschwitz,” in *Negative Dialectics*, 264.

⁶⁴ Adorno, “Dying Today,” in *Negative Dialectics*, 371. My emphasis.

⁶⁵ See Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, IX, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, III.

requires remembrance of the past.⁶⁶ More precisely, bodily shock may be the only way in which a violent past is remembered or represented. It is this difference that makes evident the manner in which *Philosophy of New Music* is an extended excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment” as well as several of the paralipomena gathered under “Notes and Sketches.”

At the end of the 1944–47 preface, Horkheimer and Adorno describe “Elements of Antisemitism” as theses in which “a philosophical pre-history of antisemitism is sketched,” in the light of the concrete “reversion of enlightened civilization into barbarism in reality.” Alluding to Benjamin and reflecting Marx’s theses on the relation between political institutions and the ideology to which they give rise, these new “Theses” on the philosophy of history seek to bring into relief the manner in which the forms of “irrationalism” that antisemitism assumes originate in the historical forms of the dominant reason and the world of which they are the image.⁶⁷ There is a poignantly desperate hope to the project of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; as if in parody of Kant’s rejection of vulgar experience, despite the radical exposition of the scope and extent of existing barbarism and the indictment of its corresponding reigning reason, Horkheimer and Adorno maintain the conviction that only enlightenment can break through the limits of Enlightenment. Ironically, it is precisely by destroying the future orientation of the Kantian abstract “rational” hope for Enlightenment – the futurity of which is the only “justification” for such hope in which are grounded all Kantian normative claims – that enlightenment may still restore hope, not through

⁶⁶ However syntactically awkward it may be, I deploy the language of “remembrance” deliberately against the language of “memory,” which, epistemologically, can be understood as a faculty of the autonomous subject who can recall at will. This is the Cartesian subject first radically criticized by Spinoza and subsequently by Marx and Freud. It is no exaggeration to argue that Freudian psychoanalysis is the antithesis of the Cartesian/Kantian subject.

⁶⁷ And, here I wish to recall again that this materialist formulation originates in Spinoza’s claim that “mind is nothing but an idea of body or the “same” claim in a different form, namely, “the order and connection of ideas is the same (*idem*) as the order and connection of things.”

the abstract categories of pure reason, but through reflection – which reflection is oriented to/by the past.

What is at stake is not culture as value . . . but the necessity for enlightenment to reflect upon itself if humanity is not to be totally betrayed. What is at stake is not conservation but the fulfillment of past hopes. Today however, the past is being continued as destruction of the past.⁶⁸

In the abstract affirmation of culture as value and for its sake, human beings have been and continue to be eliminated twice and, in the camps, thrice: first by becoming random numbers or specimens, second by “something worse than death,” and third by the destruction of the past and, thereby, the possibility of remembering.

Insofar as the “Notes and Sketches” at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* “in part, form part of the ideas in the preceding sections, without having found a place in them, and in part deal provisionally with problems of future work,”⁶⁹ they resemble the medieval, legal *extravagantes*, vagrantly wandering outside the text, commenting on the preceding fragments, forging new perspectives on them. Moreover, insofar as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a whole is a critique of the philosophy of history, and insofar as “Elements of Antisemitism” seeks the prehistory of a form of barbarism heretofore unimaginable, it is a new philosophy of history as catastrophe. Two of these fragments, “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History” and “In the Genesis of Stupidity,” provide an especially chilling perspective on philosophy of history as catastrophe, in which the paranoid projection that “the Jew” is, and the “Jewish Question” plays the central role. It is the projected enemy writ large, simultaneously subject of covert envy and hatred, which hatred is deployed by the totalitarian to maintain terror in the masses and thereby control the direction of their frustrated libidinal energy. The “Notes” crystallize the fact that fear is the origin of stupidity. The more

⁶⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, preface (1944 and 1947), xvii. The similarity to Marx’s claim, cited in note 8 to “For a Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing,” is rather striking.

⁶⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, preface, xix.

the Jew is presented as a threat to self-preservation,⁷⁰ the more certain it is that no experience to the contrary can overcome such fear or confirm it as false. And, where fear is, there can be no reflection; for the latter requires mediation, whereas fear, insofar as it is necessary for self-preservation, demands immediate response. As Horkheimer and Adorno bleakly observe, in the light of psychoanalysis, in healthy subjects reflection “breaks the power of immediacy,” but “is never as compelling as the illusion it dispels.”⁷¹ If, as they also state, “paranoia is the shadow of cognition,” the Jew is the specter that powerfully resists Jews in reality, Jews as human beings, or as members of what Marx presented as “socialized humanity.”⁷²

As the culmination of the critique of the philosophy of history, “Elements of Antisemitism” and the “Notes and Sketches” make evident the fact that the persistence of the Jew as specter, and its diabolical status as mortal enemy, is in fact a product of the story of the philosophy of history known as Enlightenment. By its very nature the Jew belies the claims of history as the arena of progress in moral perfection and subjective freedom and the corresponding theories about the objective political mechanisms of the attainment of happiness. In short, the Jew is the scandalon.

No matter what the makeup of the Jews may be *in reality* [*an sich selber*], their image [*Bild*], that of the defeated, has characteristics which must make totalitarian rule their mortal enemy: happiness without power, reward without work, a homeland without frontiers, religion without myth. These features are outlawed by the ruling powers.⁷³

In light of the fact that Horkheimer and Adorno painstakingly sketch out the destruction of the free subject, the subject who can reflect and who has been replaced by an object capable only of blind obedience, the real conditions of the possibility of reflection

⁷⁰ Compare Kant’s presentation of the Jew as a danger to the State discussed in [Chapter 1](#).

⁷¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, “Elements of Antisemitism,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 161.

⁷² See the discussion of “On the Jewish Question” in [Chapter 2](#).

⁷³ Horkheimer and Adorno, “Elements of Antisemitism,” 165. My emphasis.

or the return of the human capable of recognizing the humanity of another, of a Jew, which they sum up at the end of Fragment VI of “Elements of Antisemitism,” can only be understood in the contrary to fact subjunctive mood of the impossible wish of Jewish humor, of the beggar who “chooses” to exchange the wish, with its future orientation, for its past fulfillment.⁷⁴ In this mood and as they recognize, this *will have required* a different prehistory. The refusal or inability to recognize the Jew as a human being, the condition for stepping away from the antisemitic society, the move toward a human society, or Marx’s socialized humanity, “would fulfill the fascist lie by contradicting it: the Jewish question would indeed prove the turning point in history.”⁷⁵

Fragment VII, the one concluding “Elements of Antisemitism,” which was not contained in the 1944 edition, paints an even bleaker picture about the possibility of the return of the subject. There are no more anti-semites today simply because all that remains is stereotypical thinking, a party platform that can be mobilized against anyone or anything identified as being Jewish. The more advanced technology becomes the model for mental work prohibited from drawing unwanted conclusions, the more powerful the prohibition, the greater is the stupidity that nourishes antisemitism. In stereotyped, cliché “thinking,” there exist no human subjects, but only friend or foe. And, in a prophetic voice that rings as true today as it did then, Horkheimer and Adorno note that “the disregard for the subject makes things easy for the administration. Ethnic groups are transported to different latitudes; individuals labeled ‘Jew’ are dispatched to gas chambers.”⁷⁶

As a new form of philosophical writings, like the new music, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* exposes the history of progress as the vehicle of catastrophe, and its substance “[as] determined to a certain extent by its hostility toward the administered world.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.2.

⁷⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, “Elements of Antisemitism,” 165.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁷ Adorno, “Music and New Music,” 263.

Catastrophe notwithstanding, against idle prophesy about the possibility of new music for transformation in the future, of revolt becoming revolution, Adorno maintains that “even if that were not possible, it would not in itself constitute a judgment on it.”⁷⁸ Like philosophy or enlightenment, which seeks to liberate itself from myth, music seeks to liberate itself from semblance. In full recognition of the impossibility of its aim, it is not idle. As Adorno insists, “nevertheless, that ideal is also perfectly practical. The alleged esotericism of the new music desires not only to help articulate its social content, which the language of society suppresses. It communicates through non-communication: it aims to blast away the things blocking mankind’s ears *which they themselves hasten to close once more*.”⁷⁹ Adorno’s subsequent work, especially the radio addresses, seeks to unblock blinded eyes and stupefied minds in a similar manner. This is the manner in which they, too, are “perfectly practical.”

Brief Excursus

It is highly ironic that the preenlightened, theologically informed medieval persecution of the Jews did not seek their annihilation; on the contrary, since the *sine qua non* condition of the second coming was the conversion of the Jews. In fact, it was often the theologians who restricted the power of rulers, admonishing them against expelling or murdering the Jews, advising them instead to deprive Jews of means of employment beyond subsistence so that they would serve as living witness to the wretched misery of those who deny universal salvation through Christ.⁸⁰ By this perverse calculating logic, the Jews could still come to be full members of the universal (catholic) human community. (The similarity of the medieval arguments to Kant’s and Bauer’s is striking.)⁸¹ In contradistinction, while later pogroms and other

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 265. My emphasis.

⁸⁰ See Dobbs-Weinstein, “Jewish Philosophy,” 121–46, esp. 141–44.

⁸¹ Compare [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#).

murderous activities were instigated by clergymen and religious fanatics, they were not theologically informed, and their motivation foreshadowed the totalitarian production of mass paranoia, which required less effort since the masses were already both poor and dumb.

IV. The Possibility of Experience: Praxis and Politics after Auschwitz

The indissoluble relation between memory⁸² and the possibility of experience becomes the urgent focus of Adorno's later works and once again discloses a kinship between his and Benjamin's thoughts on history and praxis to an extent rarely acknowledged. In "The Meaning of Working through the Past," Adorno juxtaposes two senses of "working through": a Freudian psychoanalytic understanding that demands a lucid conscious effort of confronting the past in all its horror in order to break its spell and the pervasive meaning that expresses the desire "to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory,"⁸³ in order not only to forget but also to be forgiven, that is, be absolved of responsibility, for it.⁸⁴ Developing further and intensifying the analyses at the end of "Elements of Antisemitism,"

⁸² I deploy the term *memory* here to reflect Adorno's idiom, but understood as "remembrance" rather than as a faculty of a knowing subject. Given the psychoanalytic frame of the discussion, it should be amply evident that neither for Freud nor for Adorno can there be a knowing subject who can remember at will.

⁸³ Adorno, "Meaning of Working through the Past," 89, 337–38n1. The term "working through" in this essay translates *Aufarbeitung*, as distinct from both Freudian psychoanalytic use of *durcharbeitung*, to which it is related in the sense of discharging an unpleasant task, and a serious "working upon" (*verarbeiten*) the past, confronting it in all its horror.

⁸⁴ Ironically, this "working through" is the contradictory of the Freudian working through, which on a Freudian reading would be a manifestation of a resistance to a psychoanalytic working through. More important, according to Freud, the origin of this resistance is the super ego and "seems to originate from a sense of guilt or the need for punishment; and it opposes every move toward success, including, therefore, the patient's own recovery through analysis." Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety*, 94. Cf. also *The Ego and the Id*, Chapter 5.

Adorno situates the two senses of working through the past in a dialectical relation to repression, the one seeking to bring its unbearable psychic wound to light so as to actively resist its persistent destructive force in the present, the other striving to erase it from consciousness “as a defensiveness against guilt.”⁸⁵

Reflecting on the persistence and insistence of the desire to erase the horror from memory, in fact to erase memory, Adorno states:

One wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid with guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is still very much alive.⁸⁶

Insofar as “nothing can live in the shadow of the past,” the present “life” of the past prevents human living.⁸⁷ That is, when Adorno reformulates the question whether there can be poetry after Auschwitz to the question whether one can go on living after Auschwitz in *Negative Dialectics*, he asks it in the face of the persistence of poetry and living its spectral persistence now. Or as Maurice Blanchot starkly opens the *Writing of the Disaster*, “the Disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact.”⁸⁸

Although Adorno continues to deploy Freudian psychoanalytic concepts and language to diagnose the “despair” originating in the face of this stark recognition, a recognition that underlines the social pathology of forgetting, he is first careful to distance Freudian psychoanalysis and his thought from the common psychiatric language of pathology and normalcy denying both the imaginative or illusory nature of pathology (here guilt complex), as well as the normalcy or health of the “realistic person [who] is fully absorbed in the present and its practical goals.”⁸⁹ There

⁸⁵ Adorno, “Meaning of Working through the Past,” 89.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Adorno’s quotation of Ferdinand Kürnberger, which opens Part I of *Minima Moralia*, starkly remarks, “Life does not live.”

⁸⁸ Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, 1.

⁸⁹ Adorno, “Meaning of Working through the Past,” 91.

is something terrifyingly grotesque about talk of psychic health, let alone this division of psychic health in the shadow of the disaster. On the subjective side, guilt is reduced to a psychological disposition of the one whose affect it is; but more important, on the objective side, “the terribly real past is trivialized into merely a figment of the imagination of those who are affected by it.”⁹⁰ The healthy ones, on this view, then, are the ones without affect, the ones who cannot love or who do not suffer the past as a wounded, even if completely distorted, “memory,” or rather a bodily symptom of an unbearable violent past. The language and, indeed, practices of psychiatry (to which I wish to add most contemporary trauma therapy) are nothing but the “rationalizing” reflection of the desire to forget. To bring the perversion/reversion of psychic health into relief, Adorno briefly cites Mephistopheles’ reaction to Faust’s death, the devil whose “innermost principle [is] the destruction of memory.”⁹¹

I cite the full verse in order to better bring to light the duplicitous relations between meaning and memory.

All’s over! – what meaning can be drawn?
That things might just as well have never been,
but chase around in circles as if they did exist.
I’d much prefer Eternal Emptiness instead.⁹²

What is profoundly disturbing and poignantly ironic about this verse, and especially Adorno’s use of it, is that they highlight the facts that both the attempt to deny the meaning of destruction and the attempt to rationalize it, that is, give its afterlife (or future) a different meaning, demand not only the destruction of memory but also of the dead who are thus damned to eternal oblivion. The difficulty brought to light by Adorno here is that precisely in the face of the meaninglessness of destruction, the materialist philosopher must nonetheless find the conceptual idiom to explain its persistent threat, an explanation, that

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² The translation here is my own modification of those of Kaufman and Atkins. I thank Sara Figal for the reference to Atkins.

is, (critical) theory, without which action, or thoughtful praxis, against it would be not so much futile, but more important, may perpetuate the violence, especially so long as the objective conditions that produce and favor the “realistic, practical man of the present” or the actionist remain unchanged.

Following Marx, in both “The Meaning of Working through the Past” and “Education after Auschwitz,” Adorno is explicit that the persistent threat of barbarism, in fact the persistence of barbarism at the heart of culture, that is, the barbarism within democracy as distinct from the barbarism opposed to democracy,⁹³ will not be diminished so long as the objective conditions that give rise to it persist. But, for good historical, material reasons, he departs from Marx’s belief that extreme oppressive conditions will bring about self-consciousness and, perhaps, also the overcoming of oppressive institutions. For the desire to forget the past is a desire for the destruction of the subject and its absorption into the oppressive totality, that is, his total identification with the victor, rather than of his possible liberation from, and overturning of, oppression. Supplementing Marx with Freud, Adorno carefully delineates the pernicious dialectics of oppression in accord with which the perpetuation and triumph of oppressive institutions produce not only the alienated or reified consciousness, that is, oppressed subjects, who are their antithesis, but also, and more important, their positive affirmation, that is, the tools or puppets of their perpetuation. That is, rather than being overcome in the form of freedom from oppression, the antithesis between oppressive objective conditions/oppressed subject results in the sublation/absorption of the subject into the object, its becoming identical with the object, which therefore assures the endless perpetuation of institutions of oppression. Thus understood, the significant difference between Marx and Adorno also marks their shared commitment to historical materialism. All too briefly and simply stated, to the same extent that the historical material conditions, that is, the objective institutions,

⁹³ Adorno, “Meaning of Working through the Past,” 90.

religious/economic/political, and their subjects critiqued by Marx have radically changed, so must their critique.

However profound and insightful the analyses of objective conditions may be, Marx's focus on them remains insufficient insofar as, despite his emphases on alienation and the brutality of reification, Marx fails to see the extent to which the reified subject has or can be annihilated as an antithetical subject. Differently stated, Marx's critique of religion and/or ideology does not go far enough or remains too closely tied to the Hegelian, and left-Hegelian, dialectic that he sought to turn upside down. Succinctly stated, Marx's focus on the objective, that is, material, conditions of oppression, precisely because of its debt to Hegel, failed to appreciate the extent to which subject and object were indissolubly tied. Nonetheless, it cannot be overemphasized that this claim is possible/visible only in the light of concrete, material, historical change. At the same time, it is important to note that Marx's emphasis upon objective conditions, the emphasis which leads to positivist, vulgar Marxism and actionism, ignores or fails to appreciate the dialectical entanglement of subject and object, theory and practice.⁹⁴ Plainly, succinctly, but very reluctantly stated, against Hegelian necessity, Marx's subject, even when alienated, retains a kind, or at least a degree, of autonomy that is an uncritical remainder of the autonomous Modern, specifically Kantian, subject, the subject whose autonomy is really distinct from the institutions that produce it, even on Marx's own account.

In the face of the persistent condemnations of Adorno's purported retreat from political engagement, I insist that the radio addresses, both in terms of form and content, are political interventions in a way similar to Schoenberg's and Cage's musical compositions. First and most patently, although rarely

⁹⁴ A further detailed discussion of the dialectical relations between subject and object, theory and practice, and especially of Adorno's critique of Marx's treatment of theory and practice requires extended analyses of Adorno's relation to Marx beyond the confines of this book. At present suffice it to point out that I do not fully agree with Adorno's assessment of Marx's understanding of critique, although it is not entirely unjustified.

acknowledged, they are meant to be heard. Second, they are addressed to broad audiences rather than to philosophers or critical theorists. Third, they are “performed” in full recognition that their audiences are most likely to reject or resist them for fear either of acknowledging their complicity with oppressive institutions and/or of the power of these institutions, that is, because of a sense of guilt and fear of punishment.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, these interventions are not quixotic. Convinced that where there is no critique, there can be no democracy, that is, thoughtful praxis, Adorno seeks to bring into sharp relief the greatest obstacle to democracy in the recently liberated world, a world in which the desire to overcome the past is complemented by loud, uncritical, that is, unreflective, pronouncements of a commitment to democracy. Indeed, the relation to the past is key to the possibility of democracy, objective as well as subjective. Hence, Adorno turns to the dialectical relation between the objective and subjective conditions which, after Auschwitz, result not only in the desire to overcome the past, a desire whose fulfillment requires the annihilation of memory and, with it, the subject of experience, but, thereby, also in the double occlusion/forgetting of the conditions of oppression.

The tension that motivates Adorno’s thought and that he repeatedly emphasized is located initially in the diabolical dialectic between subject and object (a dialectic ironically reminiscent of Augustine’s two cities), subjective and objective conditions once their relation has first been severed in the modern turn to the autonomous subject, who is allegedly both free from and master of objective conditions, and subsequently by the imminent threat of the destruction of the subject precisely because the unreflective renewed celebration of democracy uncritically resumes the myth of the autonomous rational subject. Thus, Adorno’s turn to the subject with Freud (and one could even say with Kant) is a desperate one, for it is carried out in the full recognition that “the past

⁹⁵ For a brief and clear discussion of Adorno’s role as a public intellectual and his view of his role as a political one, see Henry Pickford’s translator’s preface to *Critical Models*.

will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.”⁹⁶ And the spell is a spell over the subject, a spell that no subjective enlightenment is powerful enough to break. More important, in a manner strikingly reminiscent of Spinoza, Adorno is explicit not only that no *mere* idea/thought “can oppose the objective danger objectively” but also that no lofty idea, no Kantian ideal, not even the idea of freedom and humanitarianism, can do so, precisely because it has become materially/historically amply evident that such an idea/ideal “in its abstract form does not mean very much to people.”⁹⁷ Thus, in a stark acknowledgment of the impotence of Kantian ideas, the ideals of whose subject are predicated upon the repudiation of “vulgar,” that is, material, experience, and whose “experience” is mediated by the categories of reason, time, and space, Adorno once again returns to vulgar experience, to the empirical subject and thus to self-interest, as the only remaining possibility of reaching the subject and, perhaps, being able to accomplish “a little something.”⁹⁸

One would really be guilty of speculative psychologizing in these matters if one disregarded that the war and the suffering it brought upon the German population, although indeed being insufficient to remove the fascist potential, nonetheless offers some counterweight against it. If people are reminded of the simplest [i.e., vulgar] things: that open and disguised fascist revivals will cause war, suffering, and privation under a coercive system . . . in short, that they lead to a politics of catastrophe, then this will impress people more deeply than invoking ideals or even the suffering of others, which is always relatively easy to get over.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Adorno, “Meaning of Working through the Past,” 103. Or, as Benjamin points out in Thesis VI, “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And, this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.” Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4:391.

⁹⁷ Adorno, “Meaning of Working through the Past,” 102.

⁹⁸ Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 204.

⁹⁹ Adorno, “Meaning of Working Through the Past,” 102.

For, as Adorno points out numerous times, no concrete experience with Jews can counter the universal concept of the “Jew,” precisely because “the genuine anti-Semite is defined far more by his incapacity for any experience whatsoever, by his unresponsiveness.”¹⁰⁰

Hence, in “Education after Auschwitz,” especially after the abysmal failure to educate his German audience, to counter their desire to get over the past (evident in an attempted exchange with them following the 1959 radio address “The Meaning of Working through the Past”), Adorno turns even more emphatically to the subject in an attempt to understand the difference between the desktop murderers and ideologues, who have been fully absorbed into the oppressive objective conditions, or whose interests are in the perpetuation of the oppressive systems with which they fully identify, and those who carry out, or are bearers of, their orders. The former architects of destructions have ceased to be subjects; the more they identify their self-preservation with the institutions of oppression, the more they cease to be capable of embodied experience, let alone of empathy with others’ embodied suffering, the more they become “cold,” indifferent, numerable things among things as distinct from individual bodies capable of suffering. In contradistinction, the bearers of destruction, the tools or puppets of the oppressor, precisely insofar as they are bearers of material suffering, if only in a grotesquely deformed, alienated way, are always already materially individuated and hence may still be made to experience their alienation (from power) as an imminent threat of self-annihilation. Reflecting on Benjamin’s seemingly naive question whether there are still enough torturers to execute the violence, Adorno points out the insightfulness of the question:

Benjamin sensed that the people who do it, as opposed to the bureaucratic desktop murderers and ideologues, operate contrary to their own immediate interests, are murderers of themselves while they murder others.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” 204.

In light of this apparently slight but in fact significant difference, Adorno concludes:

I fear that the measures of even such an elaborate education will hardly hinder the renewed growth of desktop murderers. But, there are people who do it down below, indeed as servants, through which they perpetuate their own servitude and degrade themselves, . . . against this education and enlightenment can still manage a little something.¹⁰²

For the difference is one between reified objects and alienated subjects.

By way of a conclusion, I wish to note that it is no exaggeration to claim that Adorno's later works, especially some of the radio addresses, effect a critical dialectic and, yes, political intervention as well as mediation between Kant and Marx in order to expose the complicit similarity between the disdain for vulgar experience and the blind emersion in it, between the belief in the power of ideals and actionism as vehicles of liberation. Precisely stated, the former requires the separation of subject and object, the latter of theory and praxis. For, against Hegel, Kant's endorsement of chiliastic teleology and Marx's rejection of all teleology are responses to violence and suffering rather than their rationalization or material justification. To bring Kant and Marx into dialectical engagement is also to return to Augustine and Aristotle. For the forbear of Kant's insistence upon the power of reason over vulgar experience, an insistence occasioned by reason's affective repulsion at meaningless violence/suffering, is Augustine, whose inward turn is the first moment of separating subject and object, whereby the subject both determines the object and masters it. Conversely, the first forbear to Marx's critique of teleology, its exposition as violence which occasions the turn to praxis, is Aristotle. Insofar as the dialectical engagement in both cases exposes a peculiar tension or limitation in both Kant and Marx, a lack of mediation by affect/psyche, a lack which sustains the separation between subject and object, theory and praxis, Adorno's intervention exposes the ways in

¹⁰² Ibid.

which both Kantian and actionist Marxist praxis are oriented to a nonexistent future, whose projection requires the forgetting of the dead. It should come as no surprise by now that it is my claim that the forebears of the mediation between Kant and Marx, a mediation that is at once historical and political, material and affective, are Spinoza and Freud.

Against both philosophical despair and the accusations of resignation by vulgar Marxists/actionists, rather than conjuring a messianic future Adorno, provides a decidedly political response at the very end of “Resignation”:

Thought is happiness even as it defines unhappiness by enunciating it. By this alone happiness reaches into the universal unhappiness. Whoever does not let it atrophy has not resigned.¹⁰³

In tribute to Adorno’s “Finale” to *Minima Moralia*: only that thought that confronts real suffering and shows its conditionality or vulnerability, if it is to honor itself as critical, may still accomplish a little something in the totally administered world. And this thought is practical, oriented as it is by a debt to the past and real suffering rather than blindly rushing toward an ideal utopian future and the repudiation of suffering.

Afterword: The Possibility of Political Philosophy Now

Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thought depends on the density of the texture.¹⁰⁴

The fear of page long paragraphs [is] a fear created by the marketplace – by the consumer who does not want to tax himself and to whom first editors and then writers accommodated for the sake of their incomes, until they finally create ideologies for their own accommodation, like *lucidity, objectivity, and concise precision*.¹⁰⁵

In the dash thought becomes aware of its fragmentary character.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Adorno, “Resignation,” in *Critical Models*, 293.

¹⁰⁴ Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *Notes to Literature*, 1, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Adorno, “Punctuation Marks,” in *Notes to Literature* 1, 95. My emphasis.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, 93.

Language meets its catastrophe not merely in its individual words and syntactical structure. Many words clump together in the pull of communication, prior and contrary to all meaning.¹⁰⁷

An equally apt subtitle to this afterword would be “Why Return to Early Critical Theory, Specifically to Adorno, Now?” The simplest answer is, precisely because of the usurpation of politics by religion greatly facilitated by the advanced technological capability of mass mobilization to which the philosophers’ response is entirely inadequate. Radical historical changes notwithstanding, both dominant forms of the philosophers’ responses continue the ahistorical, and apolitical, “founding moment” of Modern philosophy, refusing to confront the present as catastrophe. On one hand, analytic political philosophers continue to insist on the power of reason over the affects; on the other, philosophers of all “denominations” desperately turn to religion and/or theology in search of meaning in the face of the unreason unleashed, on one hand, by religion and, on the other, recently, by the collapse of capitalism – reason and capitalist economy, the cornerstones of Modern liberal democracies.

In what should have been a satirical expression of both of these phenomena, a current version of Umberto Eco’s “Travels in Hyperreality,” but is not, Carlin Romano’s *America the Philosophical* exploits them, presenting a palliative version of a philosophy whose birthplace and current fertile ground is America, which, although it will no doubt have mass appeal, is a caricature of all serious current philosophical attempts to confront the present as the menacing catastrophe that it is. Even the briefest survey of the full spectrum of the philosophical literature in social and political philosophy, Liberal, New Left,

¹⁰⁷ Adorno, *Critical Models*, “Introduction,” 3. The complicity of language, including philosophical language, with the marketplace and the status quo is central to Adorno’s critical analyses and, hence, form of writing. The “ideological/associative,” as opposed to independent, status of language can (and should) be traced to Spinoza’s “*modus loquendi ad captum vulgi*.” To recall, the origin of this judgment is the Talmud, which states that the “Torah speaks human language,” a judgment repeated numerous times by Maimonides.

Critical Theory, Continental,¹⁰⁸ published in the past few years, and with growing urgency since 9/11, makes evident the extent of the return of religion to the public sphere and the seriousness with which it is rightly taken.

It is clearly beyond the scope and intention of an afterword to engage this extensive literature critically, let alone in the face of current political events. Instead, and in anticipation of, or gesturing toward, subsequent research and writing, I shall take my cue from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics* and offer four “Notes and Sketches” and “Meditations on Metaphysics” (néé Theology) in the light of the preceding chapters, current political climate, and common themes in the philosophical responses to it, irrespective of radical differences in philosophical idiom.

Brief Historical Correction

Perhaps the single, most glaring aspect of the turn to religion is that it relies on a narrow, natural, scientific definition of reason, whose neutrality philosophers then seek to debunk, and complement with a religious idiom in which to ground moral and political claims for justice in the face of suffering. These attempts often seem either to confuse religion and theology or conflate them. But, pace Habermas,¹⁰⁹ the conflict between religion (moderate or immoderate) and reason, narrowly or even more broadly construed, is not epistemological, whereas that

¹⁰⁸ Properly speaking, much of Continental philosophy was always already “theological” or onto-theological, so that Heidegger’s retreat from concrete politics after “the turn,” his language and poetry essays, were but “philosophical” versions of his statement “only a god can save us now.”

¹⁰⁹ Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*; Habermas, *An Awareness of What Is Missing*; and Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, *Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. This is but the most recent attempt by Habermas to mediate the conflict between Reason and Religion. I limit my “Notes” to some considerations of Habermas’s recent work first and foremost because of his continued status as a preeminent critical theorist and in response to his claim to be heir to Benjamin and Horkheimer against Adorno. The bibliography presents a more comprehensive list of recent studies of this phenomenon.

between a narrow conception of reason and science may be. The claim that systematic theology is a science is as old as theology. It is a science that, especially in its Aristotelian version, seeks to complement and supplement other sciences and provide metaphysics with the certainty that it cannot otherwise have; for no science can ground its own first principles.¹¹⁰ This theological claim in all its versions *per se* and *in se* has no political implications or pretenses. Moreover, following Aristotle, who explicitly argued that ethical virtue is not by nature – (and cannot be rationally deduced), but by convention/habituation (i.e., mores and laws) – the pre-Modern religious philosophers and theologians could argue for the superiority of the convention provided by divine law, however few or many are the primary principles required for the derivation of positive law from it. But this is precisely where the abyss between Jewish and Christian philosophy gapes most widely, where Judaeo-Christianity is exposed as a Christian story; for, as I argued at some length, Judaism is an orthopraxy, whereas Christianity is an orthodoxy. Judaism is concerned with just practice *now* in the face of historical injustice, whereas Christianity is concerned with faith/belief necessary for salvation in the *future*. Judaism has no claims to universality, whereas Christianity requires universality, that is, totality. That is why it is wizened and forgotten theology to which Benjamin turns for assistance against the violent march toward the escathon, that is, against religion.

The Tension between Secular Democracy and Religion

Rather than rely on a version of Judaism that is decidedly a-rational, and antiphilosophical, following Scholem's search for another history,¹¹¹ let alone in violation of the central legal

¹¹⁰ Even for Augustine, for whom philosophy should be the handmaiden of theology, the question of theology – but not religion – is a question of knowledge. Thus, before he turns to the two fundamental aporia concerning “principles of nature,” time and the origin of the universe, *Confession 10* is concerned with the nature of human knowing, of mind, memory, and forgetting.

¹¹¹ Habermas, *Religion and Rationality*.

prohibitions represented by Lurianic Kabbalah and Shabtai Zvi, the false messiah (a “Jewish tradition” in strong tension with all interpretations of Jewish Halakhah, especially the prohibition against preparation for the messianic age) – a history or tradition that Scholem fully acknowledges to be heavily influenced by Christian millenarian movements – and turn to a decidedly *philosophical* tradition, of Maimonides and his Modern interpreters, Solomon Maimon and Herman Cohen, Habermas presents a version that may fit well with his escathological version of Judaeo-Christianity. But, to repeat my blunt claim in [Chapter 4](#), Habermas does not understand the Jewish tradition, its philosophical, legal, or even mystical formulations. In contradistinction, when Benjamin “praises” Kafka for presenting an Haggadah that raises a mighty paw against the Halakhah,¹¹² he recognizes that it is precisely in a dialectical relation with the latter that the former can adopt “the standpoint of redemption,” whose mood is the contrary to fact subjunctive. Precisely stated, Habermas’s version of religion is decidedly Christian. Ironically in agreement with Leo Strauss, Habermas’s insistence on the opposition between Jerusalem and Athens is indeed irreconcilable with democracy.

A Lesson from Recent History and Current Politics

It should be a truism, but is not, that all political foundations are violent

A brief historical look at the foundation of the State of Israel in the light of its progressive undermining of its democratic institutions would have served Habermas (and other accommodationists) as an excellent empirical example of the danger of democratic political concessions to religion. In defiance of Herzl’s dream of a thoroughly secular Jewish State (as an accommodationist attempt at unity), and in the naive Marxist belief that the number of religious Jews in the state will wane and hence the role of rabbis will become obsolete, Ben-Gurion invited religious leaders into his government and granted the rabbis with an extensive legal role at the heart of its social secular institutions.

¹¹² Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.2.

The “liberation” of former Soviet satellites from totalitarianism (the former Yugoslavia, or the current Ukraine, as well as the recent events of the misnamed Arab Spring) offers further chilling, heretofore unimaginable, examples of new forms of barbarism at the heart of culture, which Adorno’s work seeks to uncover and understand. As I argued throughout the book, the critique of religion from Spinoza on, properly understood, has never assumed that reason or spirit can supersede religion; rather, it seeks to understand religion as a material psychic need and respond to its power as mass power by excluding it from politics rather than repressing or accommodating it – religion repressed leads to regression rather than revolution. Religion accommodated leads to the usurpation of politics by religion.

There is no doubt that the Egyptian revolt (rather than revolution), just like the Iranian one before it, was a democratic overthrow of tyranny. As Machiavelli, Spinoza, and other astute historical materialist political philosophers have long recognized, it is the tyrant who has most to fear. But, there is also little doubt that the theocracy that Egypt’s *most* popular leaders, the Muslim Brothers, sought in Egypt and still seek elsewhere is decidedly undemocratic. But, as Machiavelli also astutely observed, the same popular mob, who qua mob has no religion, will quickly turn against “a new prince” if its aspirations are frustrated, especially if the force of arms is opposed to the force of law, including religious law, as it was in Egypt. Most important, no religion, however moderate, when coupled with nationalist, that is, political, claims and hopes, can be reconciled with critical self-reflection. And critical reflection is both the condition for democracy and the only “justification” for philosophy today.

Against Utopia

Reflecting on the German Jewish exiles in America, Leo Löwenthal remarked:

What has not been lost is, of course, the critical approach: the process of analysis, retaining the good and rejecting the bad, the need to accuse, the indictment of all that exists . . . , but without explicit hopes. What

has occurred is not a retreat into skepticism or cynicism, but sadness. The utopian motif has been suspended.¹¹³

Rather than signaling resignation, the release from “explicit hope” may provide a standpoint that will make possible critical intervention against injustice in the present, if only as alarmed and alarming protest. To do so, however, requires a critical, *negative* engagement with the present and the history that produced it rather than the renunciation of Modernity’s aspirations. The Ba’atist, secularist, iron-fisted repression and persecution of the Muslim Brothers, Soviet repression of all religious practices, and their “democratic” or, rather, popular overthrow are exemplary expressions of Modern radical nationalist aspirations, which aspirations are exploited by new, cynical tyrants and demagogues. The philosophers’ flight from the Modern into an archaic past, its positivist endorsement, or the illusion that post-Modernity is the supersession of Modernity are symptoms of the same philosophical malaise as is the desperate attempt to accommodate a “moderate” version of religion. To understand the present as the catastrophe that it is, is to understand it dialectically in the extremes.

Now more than ever, the utopian motif *must* be suspended. It is precisely utopian anarchism and aspirations that are fueling the extreme forms of barbarism we are witnessing, albeit in different ways, ranging from Putin’s contempt for both veracity and law to ISIL’s *sophisticated use* of advanced technology to rapidly disseminate triumphant visual evidence of its barbarism *using the most unsophisticated* forms of spectacular execution, whose dual purpose is to inspire terror and recruit the disenfranchised and abject. Furthermore, it is no accident that anti-Judaism is an intrinsic feature of all current forms of barbarism and is exploited as a potent recruitment tool. The recent virulent anti-Jewish riots all over Europe, populated by a monstrous coalition of disillusioned Left “intellectuals,” right-wing fanatics, and disenfranchised Moslems, are exemplary manifestations of

¹¹³ Lüdtke, “Utopian Motif Is Suspended,” 105.

the destructive libidinal energies released by shattered illusions or utopian aspirations.

The only clarity in the current global, theologico-political climate is that “secular” apocalyptic dystopias and survivalist “reality” shows are the current popular forms in which the culture industry exploits diverse expressions of despair in the face of shattered utopian hopes.¹¹⁴ ISIL does it better, buttressed as it is with the multiple and diverse resources provided by advanced technology, capital, and religion. In the face of despair and in defiance of it, the need for a fourth excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is as urgent as any attempt to compose it is premature.

In lieu of a final conclusion, I let Adorno make the final gesture, a gesture that surprisingly is not a grimace. Reflecting once again upon Rimbaud’s statement “*il faut être absolument moderne*” at the end of “Why Still Philosophy,” and in a “response” alluding to his critics, Adorno states that Rimbaud’s claim

is neither an aesthetic program nor a program for aesthetes: it is a categorical imperative of philosophy. Whatever wants nothing to do with the trajectory of history belongs all the more truly to it. History promises no salvation and offers the possibility of hope only to the concept whose movement follows history’s path to the very extreme.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ I emphasize “popular” because of the resurgence of futurist literature authored by, and addressed to, very wealthy techno-geeks, who alone would be able to enjoy the rewards of “immortality” because of their great wealth, e.g., Richard Worzel and Martine Rothblatt. It is noteworthy and in need of further reflection that this concurrence between dystopian despair and utopian futurist myths is a repetition of that evident in the early twentieth century.

¹¹⁵ Adorno, “Why Still Philosophy,” in *Critical Models*, 17.

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